

Code Name Duchess

A Historical Regency Romance Novel

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Edited by
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Contents

A Thank You Gift

Before You Start Reading...

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Extended Epilogue](#)

[Preview: The Silvered Duchess of Oldingham Manor](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Also by Hanna Hamilton](#)

[About the Author](#)

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Hanna Hamilton

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About the Book

In sickness and in health, and in the world that awaits beyond...

Miss Winnifred Keating is desperate. With her brother missing and little to no power in her hands, she has but one choice if she wants to see him again: work with the most insufferable Duke she has ever met.

Seth Dunn, Duke of Cambolton, will stop at nothing to get his sister back after she disappeared without a trace. Even if that means calling a truce with an opinionated lady who hates his guts.

Pushed together by their shared goal, their search for their missing siblings awakens not only new feelings but also a beast from the past. And it all starts with a letter, detailing their siblings' very own funeral.

Chapter 1

Winnifred Keating sat on a balcony of Drayton Manor and looked out over the garden below. Her novel, a gothic romance by Ann Radcliff, the author she adored above all others, lay beside her. She swiped a strand of her long black hair out of her face and tucked it behind her ear while watching Bell, her black and white cat, tend to her four kittens.

She was about to engross herself in the book when a loud bark sounded. A black pug raced out of the house and toward the cats. Winnie jumped up and leaned over the railing.

“Victoria, watch your dog!” She shouted as the dog charged for the cat and her kittens. Bell’s back rounded, and she hissed at the dog, who shrank back but did not retreat. Winnie slammed her fist on the wrought iron railing and spun around. She dashed through the library, down the hall, and jumped down the last two steps of their grand staircase before turning. She was almost out of the back door when she spotted her sister.

“Victoria, wake up.” Her sister sat in the armchair by the fire, a blanket over her small body, and gently snored. Her pale-pink muslin gown peeked out from under the blanket and her shoes, black half-boots, lay piled beneath the chair. Her pug’s pillow was by her feet, but of course, the dog was not there.

Vicky didn’t stir.

Her sister was a very accomplished young lady, gifted in music. She possessed the ability to play four instruments. She also spoke Latin, French, and Greek, while Winnie struggled to learn French. And yet, despite all of her talents, waking up with ease was not among them.

Winnie dismissed her sister and rushed outside. The hissing

continued, and she charged out and snatched Pugsley, who yelped in her arms, away from the cat. Bell's back was rounded, and her tail twitched, signs of her anger. Pugsley, meanwhile, barked incessantly.

"Bad, bad dog. Bad!"

"What are you doing with my dog?" Victoria's voice sounded, still drunk on sleep. "Put him down."

"No, I'm not putting him down. He charged at my cats. Control your dog." She thrust the dog into her sister's arms, who immediately cuddled and cooed at him as though he were a baby. Winnie rolled her eyes and turned her attention to her animals. Bell and the kittens retreated to the little wooden house their father made years ago when the family first took in stray cats.

Dubious about the idea of having a cat house, Winnie was more than amazed that several of their pregnant cats had used it. Looking at it always reminded her of her father and the many hours he spent putting it together. It always caused her a peculiar mix of sensations, part sorrow at her father's passing, part joy at seeing a part of him still with them.

"Why was your dog out here?" Winnie glared at her sister, her green eyes narrowed. Victoria blinked as if she'd slapped her but would not meet her eyes. Instead, she pressed the dog against herself with one arm while using the other to fiddle with her auburn-colored hair, which hung loose into her face.

"I do not know, Winnifred. Someone must have let him out. You know I do not let him go outside by himself; it is not safe for him."

"Nor for Bell and the kittens."

Victoria's blue eyes flashed with rage.

"Maybe you should not be taking in stray cats from the road. You

are getting a reputation as an old maid with an obsession for cats.”

Winnie gasped. That was a low, heartless comment even for her sister. At six-and-twenty, Winnifred approached the age where society considered one a spinster. She didn't wish to think about this circumstance. It wasn't pleasant, and besides, it was not her fault she was without a husband at this age.

“It is not as though I chose to forgo Season after Season all of these years. Someone had to remain at home and—”

“Do not blame me for your decisions, Winnie. It is not right. I had my coming out ball three years ago now, and you could have taken the opportunity to go to balls with me or go to Almack's, but you never do.”

“That isn't true. I went to Almack's just last week,” she fired back.

Winnie did not care much for the London social scene. Her parents' sudden death in a carriage accident seven years before sent Winnie into a spiral of melancholy. Instead of spending time preparing for her coming-out ball and frolicking with her friends in the local parks or the Royal Menagerie, Winnie dwelled on her sudden status as orphan and surrogate mother to her younger sister, with whom she'd never been close.

Circumstances prevented her from having a coming-out ball until she was almost one-and-twenty, old for such an event. She despised it when her sister reminded her of these circumstances. Winnie had hoped to have a husband by now. Not just any husband... An image appeared before her, and she almost broke into a smile when her sister's dramatic sigh drew her back to reality.

“One night at Almack's does not make a future bride, Winnie.”

She tilted her head to one side and blinked.

“It is not as though anyone has made an offer of marriage for you

yet, either. It seems all of your accomplishments and visits to balls haven't yielded any better results."

Victoria's nostrils flared at this, and she stepped toward Winnie, who chuckled.

"Will you sic your dog on me, Vicky? Or perhaps you wish to plant a facer on me?"

The sisters glared at one another, and while outwardly Winnie knew she appeared harsh and unkind, inside, she despised these confrontations with her sister. They were so unlike each other in both character and appearance. There never was any common ground to be found, and they inevitably traded insults—that's when there was any communication at all.

"By Jove, what are the two of you doing?" A deep, raspy voice sounded out from the house. Both girls' heads turned, and the change in the atmosphere was almost palpable.

"Leo," Vicky's tone changed entirely as she addressed her brother. Gone were the anger and irritability, and in their place was a genuine sweetness and delight at seeing their brother. Winnie understood, of course, she loved Leo, their elder brother and guardian, just as much. Or dare she even think it, more than her sister? She and Leo were closer in age than she and Victoria, but that was not why. They were alike, two peas in a pod, their mother used to call them.

Where Leo went, Winnie wasn't far. This was true when they were children, and it was still true to this day.

Vicky placed her thin red lips on their brother's cheek, and he responded in kind before planting a kiss on Winnie's forehead. She looked at her brother, who towered over her, and sighed.

"Vicky let Pugsley out, and he chased the kittens."

Leo turned his head as a frown appeared on his forehead. "Vicky, I told you to keep control of the dog."

"I did," she replied with some impertinence in her voice. "He must have escaped when I took a rest in the drawing room."

"Perhaps if you did not stay out half of the night, you would not need to take such a deep rest in the drawing room in the middle of the day," Winnie said.

"Winnie," Leo drew her name out in the same way he always did if he thought she was getting out of line. Which, of course, she was. She had little patience for her sister.

Why must she vex me so? Why is it that me and Vicky cannot be more like Leo and me? How much easier would our life have been after Mother and Father died if only she could have been more amenable, more personable, and less brash?

"Must the two of you quarrel with such ferocity? It is as though you were two children, not grown ladies of high birth."

Vicky shrugged. "I am not the one who started this quarrel. You perhaps ought to converse with our sister if you think such disagreements are not ladylike, for it is she who starts them time and again."

She shrugged and did not even look at Winnie before marching back into the house. When she was gone, and the large French door closed behind her, Leo looked at Winnie.

"WinnWinn..."

Faith, her brother knew precisely that nothing soothed her quicker than the use of the old childhood pet name only he used for her.

"I do not understand why she is so peculiar. Sometimes I wonder if she is really our sister or if the nursemaid accidentally brought the

wrong baby home from a walk in Hyde Park one day.”

Leo’s chestnut-colored eyes flashed. “Do not speak so unkindly of Vicky. She is not like you and me, but she is still our sister, and I know you love her as much as I do.”

“I suppose. I wish we could be closer, Victoria and I. And yet, we hardly speak even though we live in the same house and share the same name, the same table, the same fate. I hoped we would grow closer after Papa and Mama died, but it seems the opposite has been true. I cannot help it. We have different personalities. The best we can do is to be kind to one another.”

Leo wrapped an arm around her. Winnie, almost a head shorter than her brother, leaned against his shoulder.

“Soon either you or she will marry, and everything will change.”

Winnie sighed deeply as they sat on a bench under a mighty oak tree. They were fortunate to have as large a home as they did. Their father had been a Baron, and upon his death, Leo succeeded him as Baron Drayton. As far as the peerage went, Barons were the lowest ranking by far, and few had the good fortune to own a home as magnificent as theirs. While most wealthy Londoners lived in townhouses, theirs was a mansion in its own right. Of course, it was also their only home since they didn’t own a country estate like most peers did.

Their fortune did not come from lands or mines or even plantations overseas. Theirs came from the sugar-spice trades, and thanks to their father’s investments and her brother’s skill, they were wealthier than even some Earls.

“Perhaps it will be you who marries first. While Victoria enjoys the social circle, she does not appear inclined to court, or if she is, she has not shared it with either of us. And I...”

“You,” her brother said as he stretched his long legs out before him, his arms crossed behind his head, “you are madly in love with Seth

and have always been.”

“Leopold Keating...”

“It is the truth. Have you not smelled of April and May since the very beginning of time? Or at least since that first night you set your eyes on Seth Dunn? Have you not dreamt of becoming the Duchess of Cambarton since you were but a young lady just out?”

She colored up and averted her eyes. Even in front of her brother, Winnifred couldn't allow her feelings for her brother's friend and business partner to show. Alas, Leo always read her like an open book, and there was nothing she could do about it.

“He is a charming man, even I must confess that. Whenever the two of us go anywhere together, he draws all the attention. Remarkable, given how mawkish and moody he can be. Seth is the one who is sought after and admired. I do not envy him. ‘pon my honor, I do not wish to have his responsibilities. It's no wonder he is sometimes so sullen.”

Winnifred shook her head. She couldn't imagine what it was like to be a Duke and become one at such a young age. Seth had succeeded his father to the title the year before her parents passed away, and she remembered the sorrow in his eyes, the weight that rested upon his shoulders and didn't seem to lift for years. It was then, during those years they each struggled with their sorrows, that a spark awoke in her heart for him, and it had grown into a roaring fire over the years that nothing, not even time, could extinguish.

“It must be difficult for him, I agree.” Her thoughts wandered to the brooding young man who was never far from her mind. It was odd, while he and her brother were close, both as business partners and as friends, she never found occasion to be alone with him. Even in company, they did not converse much. He was in many ways an enigma, a mysterious man who existed in the same realm as her, and yet an invisible veil kept them apart.

She spoke to him on occasion, always in company, of course. He

was charming when he wanted to be, witty and intelligent. However, their interaction was always superficial. It was no wonder. She was, after all, nothing to him but the sister of his friend. And he was a Duke. Despite their connection by way of Leo, they were as far apart within their class as any two members of the nobility could be. One day, she knew, he'd marry the daughter of a fellow Duke or a Marquess at least. He'd never have eyes for someone who was the mere sister of a Baron.

"He told me he saw you at Almack's a fortnight ago," Leo's voice penetrated her thoughts. Her eyebrows rose as she examined her brother's visage.

"He did? I didn't know he frequents Almack's."

"He does not. Rose had an unfortunate encounter with a young lord the week prior—the young man would not accept her refusal to dance with him a second time—and he was quite rude to her. Seth went to have a word with the young man, alas, he was not there. Anyhow, he mentioned he saw you and that you looked as though you'd rather be anywhere but there." He paused and cleared his throat. "Perhaps that is why you have such trouble finding someone to dance with at these affairs. They can tell you'd rather tend to a gaggle of geese."

The laughter burst out of her before she could control it. "I really would. I am uncomfortable at these events, and I only went because our aunt insisted. She made me feel quite terrible over the cost of the voucher."

That Season, for reasons Winnie had yet to figure out, her Aunt Anna had purchased vouchers for Almack's for herself, Victoria, and Winnie. Vouchers to Almack's Assembly Rooms were hard to come by, but they could secure them as members of the aristocracy. Alas, unlike her sister, Winnie rarely used them, much to the chagrin of her aunt.

Beside her, her brother groaned.

"I hope that is not why Uncle Ezekiel summoned me." He rubbed his bushy eyebrow as a sweat pearl formed on his temple. It was June, but the heat had arrived early this year. This was in stark contrast to the prior year. 1816 would surely be remembered as the year without summer, as it had been a miserable year.

"You're to go to Westminster?"

"Yes," he consulted his golden pocket watch. "I must go now. I have to make a stop at the office. Seth is going out of town, to Devon, for a few days to see if we can expand our business, so I need to keep an eye on the office. Anyhow, I am already late." He placed another kiss on the side of her head and jumped up. "If I am not coerced into staying for dinner, I'd like to take dinner with you and Victoria. If she will have us, given her present mood. What do you say? Family dinner together?"

Winnie got up and nodded. "I will ask the cook to make pea soup and fresh bread," she smiled. This simple meal was a Keating family tradition. Pea soup was one of the few meals their mother, the late Baroness Drayton, knew how to make herself. It remained a treasured meal for the Keatings to this day.

"I cannot wait," he winked at her and dashed up the garden stairs. As he disappeared through the door and into the interior of their manor, Winnie looked after him—entirely unaware that it would be the last time she would see her brother.

Chapter 2

Two weeks later

Winnifred sat in the plush chair in front of the desk occupied by Charles Markham, a renowned private detective, and bit her lips while the man frantically wrote notes on a sheet of paper.

She studied his face. He was an older man. His hair gave his age away, showing more grey than chestnut-brown, combined with deep circles around his eyes.

A former Bow Street Runner, his reputation preceded him wherever he went. All of the *ton* knew him and admired him for his skill. Markham had brought home several run-away ladies on their way to Gretna Green, brought to justice an assortment of thieves, and didn't even fear a venture into the rookeries of St. Giles.

He was precisely the kind of man she needed.

"You say it was a fortnight ago that you last saw your brother?"

She nodded quietly. "Yes, it was late afternoon, he was going to my uncle's."

The man nodded and confirmed her uncle's address before carrying on with his notes.

A surge of grief overcame her, and she closed her eyes, her fingers curled around the arms of the chair. She had all of her hopes pinned on this man—he had to be the answer. He had to be the person to find Leo.

Two weeks had passed since Leo walked out of the garden of their home and out of her life—and he'd never returned. All hoping and

praying and searching thus far was in vain. It was as if her brother was swallowed up in an invisible hole, never to return.

Winnifred could not let that be. She'd find her brother—somehow. And if she could not, then Charles Markham undoubtedly could. The man looked up, his large sunken brown eyes reminded her of the neighbor's beagle.

"What is the business your brother is a partner in?"

She blinked, taken aback by the question. "The Sweet & Spice Corporation."

The investigator pressed his lips together. "The other partner is the Duke of Cambarton, Seth Dunn?"

At the mention of Seth's name, there was a slight pinch in her stomach, but she forced herself to nod.

"He is out of town, otherwise, I would have spoken to him already. He and my brother are quite close."

Markham looked at her with his head tilted to one side and licked his lips. "I see." There was something in the way he spoke, something in the way he carefully enunciated the words that puzzled her. She was about to follow up on the exchange when the man changed the subject.

"Well, Miss Keating, I have another meeting following ours. I, of course, cannot reveal the nature of other clients' business—privacy, you understand. But I have a feeling I might be in a better position to assist you after. Would you be able to return here tomorrow?"

She nodded slowly, not looking forward to making the long journey to Camden again, but for Leo, she'd do just about anything. She nodded in agreement, bade the man farewell, and stepped back out into the street.

Markham's office was located in a run-down gothic-style villa and was shared with several other offices. A matchmaker was located down the hall, and a barrister kept an office upstairs. Camden was not the kind of neighborhood a young lady such as herself was able to visit without a chaperone. Even coming here to see Mr. Markham without anyone to accompany her was risky. Yet, she did not wish to involve anyone in this venture. She wasn't sure whom she could trust, and she'd rather not put her trusted maid, Mary, into an awkward position. She marched down the street toward where her carriage sat and pondered her predicament.

Victoria was at sixes and sevens at the disappearance of their brother, and Winnie did not wish to involve her aunt or uncle. Her uncle had a habit of taking over any venture he was involved in, and she didn't think he was quick-witted or clever enough to be of much use when it came to finding Leo. She'd only called on him to see if Leo actually visited them that day, and upon hearing the answer, left it at that. There was no need to tell them more. She'd turn to Uncle Ezekiel only if she had no—

"Seth?" She stopped in her tracks and squinted into the sunlight.

She could hardly believe it. The man rushing across the street and toward the villa containing Mr. Markham's office was none other than Seth, Duke of Cambarton, Leo's friend and business partner.

Under normal circumstances, Winnie would shrink back at the sight of him, such was her crush on him she could not stand to be near him without blushing. However, today her curiosity and desperation outweighed any feeling of mortification at being in his presence.

She darted back toward the office.

What is he doing here? Perhaps his destination is the barrister's office? Surely it cannot be Mr. Markham... Unless...

She opened the door to the office and let herself inside. The large waiting room, used for all of the different proprietors, was empty,

but the door to Mr. Markham's office stood ajar, and from within drifted Seth's familiar, deep baritone voice.

"Two weeks, Mr. Markham, as I said in my letter. At least two weeks. I was in Devon to attend to business, and when I returned, I found Rose gone."

Rose? His sister Rose was missing? Winnie's heart beat loudly in her chest. How could this be? Both of their siblings were missing? Did he know Leo was also gone? Before she knew what she was doing, she pushed open the door to Markham's office.

"Rose is missing?"

Mr. Markham looked up, startled. "Miss Keating, this is most unusual."

"Winnifred?" Seth's tone was at once surprised and irritable.

"Did you say Rose is missing?"

Seth licked his lips; his almond-shaped brown eyes flickered as if he wasn't quite sure what to say.

"She is. The servants reported not seeing her in more than a week. They assumed she'd gone to Devon to join me, but of course, she didn't. I've looked for her, questioned her friends—to no avail. She appears to be missing. Thus my visit to Mr. Markham. But why, pray, are you—"

"Leo is also missing. It has been almost two weeks. He disappeared after a visit to my aunt and uncle. Or so I thought. When he didn't return, I assumed they convinced him to stay for dinner, alas, I received word the following day that he never arrived at their home." She bit her lips and examined his face. His hair and strong jawline always struck her as incredibly attractive, but she was drawn to his eyes today.

She saw his pupils dilate as she gave him the news, and yet, he didn't show any other outward reaction but crossed his legs and gave a nod.

"I see, and you have engaged Mr. Markham's services?"

Why is he not more alarmed? He seems entirely calm. How can he take the news with such ease? Leo is his friend, more than a friend. They are incredibly close and he hardly even flinched when I gave him the information. I do not understand.

She pushed her confusion aside and took a step toward the two men.

"Do you not find it odd? Both your sister and my brother, missing around the same time? Do you not think we ought to join forces?"

Yes! She knew this was the best thing for them. Suddenly, the sense of helplessness she'd experienced over having to handle this issue alone eased at the prospect of having an ally. Alas, Seth shook his head and crushed her hopes at once.

"I think not, Winnifred. Rose and Leo hardly know one another."

"But..."

He shook his head and looked back at Mr. Markham. "I am pleased with the terms we've agreed upon, Mr. Markham. And I have delivered in this parcel all the information you required."

Markham swallowed and pulled on the sides of his mustache with one hand as he looked from Seth to Winnie and back again.

"Very well, Your Grace. Although I must agree with Miss Keating here, your cases are similar, and there is a connection as it pertains to the business."

Seth shook his head. "My sister is not connected to the business,

neither is Miss Keating here. I suspect my sister's absence has more to do with her very active social life, I am afraid."

Winnie shook her head. This did not make any sense. Why would he act this way? Why would he decline her help? They needed one another. More specifically, she needed him. But he didn't appear inclined to help her at all.

"Seth... I mean, Your Grace, please reconsider."

He shook his head. "I do not think it is a good idea. I will find my sister, and I will do all I can to find Leo as well, but I am not interested in working with anyone but Mr. Markham here. I do not think you could be of help to me anyhow."

He might as well have thrust a dagger directly into her heart, such was the impact of his words. He thought her a hindrance, a burden. He would look for Leo, but without her. Even though Leo was her brother. Anger replaced the pain of his word. How impertinent of him and how cruel to refuse her offer to join forces.

She reminded herself that she was still a lady, still the daughter and sister of a nobleman. And he a Duke. She pressed her lips together and curtsied—having forgotten to do so as she entered.

"Very well, Your Grace, I shall hope you find your sister and if you hear of anything about my brother...."

"I will, of course, tell you the moment I have news of him. Of either of them."

She gave him a nod and turned. When she was almost out of the door, he called her back.

"Winnifred?"

She glanced over her shoulder.

“Leo is a strong man, do not worry about him. He will be fine.”

Winnie turned on the spot and scanned his face. The moment her eyes met his, she shook her head. He didn’t believe a word of it. No, Seth was as terrified as she was—it was written all over his face.

So why, then, did he refuse to work with her? And why did she have such an urge to convince him otherwise?

“Thank you, Your Grace,” she left and exited out of the villa and into the street, her mind racing. How could she persuade him to assist her? Perhaps a bribe? She shook her head.

She had nothing he would want. He was a Duke, after all. His London townhouse was among the most opulent in the area, comprised of two townhouses merged into one. Lester House was known up and down the country for its splendor and beauty. These were not accomplishments Seth would ever claim; she knew this.

It was his mother and grandmother’s doing. They’d decorated and purchased the rich tapestries, artwork, and statues. Seth was not the kind of man to care for such things. In any case, he had all he could need. There was nothing Winnie could give him to make him reconsider.

She stopped in the street and looked around, hands planted on her hips. She raised her head high, straightened her straw bonnet, and nodded to herself.

Very well then, Seth. You do not want to help me find my brother? I shall do it myself. And I shall succeed.

With determination, she strutted down the pavement toward her carriage—entirely unaware that behind her, the young man stood at the investigator’s window and looked after her, his hands balled into fists.

Chapter 3

Seth stood at the window and watched her leave. He knew outwardly he appeared stoic and closed off as he often did, but inside he trembled with fear and rage.

Leo was missing as well?

How could this be, his sister and his partner both disappeared at the same time? Of course there was a connection. It was impossible for there not to be. But he could not allow Winnifred to know of his suspicion.

“Your Grace?” The investigator called out.

“Yes, Mr. Markham?” Seth didn’t turn. He fixed his eyes on the small, slender figure of Winnifred. How much he wanted to assist her and to ease her mind—and yet he knew he couldn’t. She’d be a distraction. Seth would never admit it, but he’d found Winnifred magnetic for many years. However, he never had and never planned to act on those feelings.

Attachments of any kind were dangerous—and this notion was never more evident than right now with both his friend and his sister missing.

Am I to lose them both on the same day? What cruel fate is this? Haven’t I endured enough trials in my life thus far?

He shook his head, knowing if he continued down this train of thought, he’d find himself drawn into melancholy, a state almost impossible to escape from, as he knew well from years of experience.

“May I speak freely?” Mr. Markham said behind him. Seth nodded

and turned away from the window. He tugged on his Pomona-green waistcoat and reached into his inner pocket for the delicately painted wooden box containing comfits. He placed one onto his tongue as he motioned for the investigator to ask whatever he wanted.

“Do you really believe your sister’s disappearance is connected to her social activities?”

He shook his head. “Of course not. Rose is nothing if not a lady. She would never put herself into unsavory positions nor keep undesirable company. My sister is a good person. No, I said that to ease Miss Keating’s mind as to there being a connection.”

The investigator licked his lips and smoothed his greying mustache.

“It seems there is a connection.”

“Of course, there is, Mr. Markham, it is quite obvious.” The man squinted at him, and Seth found himself compelled to explain his position further. “I do not like working with others on affairs as delicate as this. Miss Keating is a young woman who tends to follow her heart, not her mind, and I fear she’d only hinder my investigation.”

This was not the only reason, but it was the only reason Seth could comfortably give Markham without giving too much of himself away.

“I see. Well, in that case, I shall have to change my approach. I’d hoped for a merged investigation, but I shall have to peruse the leads separately.”

Seth shook his head. His long, wavy brown hair fell into his face.

“I want you to look for Lord Drayton. But do not tell Miss Keating I’ve asked this of you. To her, I want this to appear entirely unconnected.”

Markham sighed as he shook his head, exasperated by Seth. Seth knew his request might seem odd, after all, merging the investigations would make sense, but he could not bring himself to do so. Winnifred would distract him, he knew it. There could be no distraction on this matter. There could be no confusion nor outside influences. Seth had to focus, and he could not, not with Winnie and her beautiful eyes and red, inviting lips.

Besides...

"It could be dangerous for her. Don't you agree?"

Markham blinked. "You have an idea who or what could be behind the disappearances?"

He shrugged. "I have a clue, but I'd rather you came to your own conclusion. It's better we each pursue our ideas and then come together to see what we've discovered, rather than influence each other, do you not agree?"

Markham's eyes narrowed, making it quite clear he did not. However, he knew better than to challenge Seth. Nobody challenged a Duke. Ever.

Well, that wasn't entirely true. Rose challenged him with some frequency, and so did Leo, albeit only when it came to business. No, nobody other than Rose stood up to him, at least not in a long time.

A heavy melancholy threatened to crash over him when he suddenly rose and extended his hand to the investigator.

"I shall leave you to your work, and I will return to mine. Please send word when you have news."

Markham bowed, and when he rose once more, gave a nod of the head.

"I shall, Your Grace."

Seth spun on his heel and stalked out of the room when the man called after him.

“Your Grace?”

“Yes, Markham? What else is there?”

The man cleared his throat. “Just this. Take care of yourself.”

The words chilled Seth to the core as he remembered the last time he’d heard them spoken with such seriousness, such conviction.

No, I must not let the past catch up to me. Not today. Not when my sister’s life and that of my friend depends on it. I must keep my wits about me and press on. Dwelling on the past will do nothing but hinder and distract me. Just like Winnie would hinder me. I must do this alone. I must solve this puzzle alone. Just as I always do.

As he walked down the road toward his carriage, he pondered the events of the past few days once more. Nobody had seen his sister in almost two weeks now. The servants hadn’t alerted him until his arrival home when they found she wasn’t with him. He glared at the coachman as he pointed to the carriage door, and the man took a step back after opening it.

“Your Grace,” he bowed. “Has there been any word on Lady Rose?”

Seth closed his eyes and swallowed, forcing the rage down into the depth of his stomach.

“No, Bradford. Nothing.” He stepped up to climb into the carriage but then thought better of it.

“Bradford, why would the servants not alert me to my sister being missing for nearly two weeks?”

“I...” The man stammered as his eyes darted from Seth to the road and back, in a desperate attempt to avoid his eyes. “I do not know. I

was in Devon, with you, Your Grace.”

“I’ll be deuced, Bradford. I know that. But you are a servant, you eat in the servants’ hall. You hear them talk. Why did they not alert me?”

The coachman’s eyes focused on Seth, and he shrugged. “They assumed she’d gone to Devon with you.”

“Without letting even her lady’s maid know, without asking a maid to pack?”

The coachman took a deep breath. “There... There was a bit of fiddle-faddle among the servants that perhaps she’d....”

“By Jove, Bradford. What is it? I haven’t all day.” Seth’s patience was running out, and the coachman’s evasiveness vexed him profusely. He knew the servants were keeping secrets, but he wasn’t quite sure why. Or what. “Bradford, if I must, I will call the constable and have every one of you questioned.”

“That will not be necessary, Your Grace. The servants were aware of the argument between yourself and Lady Rose, and there was an assumption that she’d either gone to Devon on her own, via coach to make things right with you, or...”

“Or?” He prompted the man, although much gentler than before. He knew he could be hot-headed and reckless and didn’t want to take his terrible mood out on the poor coachman who wasn’t even present when Rose disappeared.

“Or that she’d perhaps run away to stay with your aunt, as she sometimes does.”

Seth’s shoulders dropped. His aunt Ophelia kept an estate in Kent, and upon discovering Rose not home he, too, assumed she’d gone there. A messenger was at once dispatched and returned with a reply in the negative. His sister wasn’t in Kent. Along with the

message came a lengthy letter, disparaging Seth's guardianship over Rose as though she were a small child, not a young, accomplished lady.

"She is not in Kent. I dare say I would have rather she stayed with Lady Ophelia—which is not a sentence I expected to utter in all of my life."

The coachman smiled, and for a moment, so did Seth. His dislike of his aunt was well known among the servants—none of whom cared for the harsh, arrogant, prideful woman, either.

"I do not understand how my dear mother was related to such a woman," he muttered, more to himself than anything else.

"Your mother was a well-loved lady, adored by all."

He placed his hand on Bradford's shoulder and gave him a nod. "Thank you, Bradford." As he sat, the coachman shut the door and tilted his head to one side.

"Home, Your Grace?"

Seth was about to nod when he remembered the letter he carried in his pocket and shook his head.

"No, not yet. First, we must make a stop. St. Giles."

Bradford's eyes grew wide, and he swallowed so hard his Adam's apple bobbed visibly.

"Are you sure, Your Grace?"

"It is daylight, Bradford. We shall be quite safe, and we will not remain long."

The coachman climbed onto the box seat, and as the carriage set into motion, Seth turned up the collar of his coat. It did nothing to

chase the chill from his bones, and no wonder. The weather didn't cause the shivers that ran down his spine; it was a glorious day after all. No, the ice in his veins had quite another cause.

Fear. For Seth knew one thing for sure. He'd just lied to his coachman, for where they were going, it was never safe. Day or night. But he had no choice—not if he wanted to see his sister again alive.

Chapter 4

“I do not need Seth Dunn, Mary. No, I certainly do not. Neither do I need Victoria. I am perfectly capable of finding Leo on my own. With Mr. Markham’s assistance, of course,” Winnie proclaimed when she returned home.

Mary, her maid and trusted companion for more than five years, followed her up to her chamber as she recounted the events of the day.

“To think he calls himself my brother’s friend. Can you believe it? Surely, not. You ought to have heard him, Mary, he acted as though I proposed the storming of St. James’ Palace.”

“But why do you suppose that is, Miss Keating? It would benefit him, would it not? Working with you?”

“You and I have more wisdom than a Peer of the Realm, it seems.”

Winnifred glanced at her maid. Mary was ten years her senior, and in many ways looking at her friend made Winnifred somewhat uneasy. At Mary’s age, one was considered a spinster. It was doubtful that she would ever marry, and her future would be the same as her present—a maid for all of her days.

Winnifred knew she would never end up as a maid, but she was headed toward the shelf, that was certain. Unless she set her cap on someone with conviction in the next year or so, she’d be an ape-leader herself.

The thought scared her. To be old and childless, entirely dependent upon the charity of her brother... She gasped. These past two weeks, her thoughts were occupied with finding her brother, not what his absence meant to their future. Now the idea was in her

mind, and she could not shake it.

“Mary, if we do not find Leo, I do not know what will become of Victoria and I.”

“Surely, your uncle would assume control of the estate. Would he not?”

Winnifred cringed at this, for Mary was right.

“Indeed. As Leo does not yet have children, the title and the estate which are in entailment will go to my father’s nearest relative, my uncle Ezekiel.” She shook her head. “Why did my father not break the entailment? I do not understand. He would never have wanted us to rely on his brother. He does not care for him. Did not, I meant to say.” Even after all of these years, sometimes she spoke of her parents as still living.

“It is well known,” Mary said carefully. Winnifred knew the servants talked; there was not much that could be kept secret in a small household such as theirs. Not that she would have told Mary such private details if they weren’t such close friends. Sometimes she wished Mary was not a maid at all so that they might be friends. Genuine friends who attended the opera or the theater.

“Would he have been able to break the entailment, your father? I didn’t know that was possible.”

“It is possible. One must consult with a barrister, and they will take it to the Court of Common Pleas. I suppose the person next in line for the entailment would have to be consulted and agree, but of course, that person was my brother, and he would gladly have agreed. The title would have gone to him anyhow, entailment or no entailment.”

Winnifred narrowed her eyes and leaned forward. In a quieter tone, she added, “Leo planned to do this, break the entailment. He didn’t have a chance to do so yet, but it was his intention.”

“Do you suppose it has something to do with his disappearance?” Mary asked. She, too, spoke in a low tone. They both knew nobody could be trusted at this time, not until they solved Leo’s disappearance. “Who would benefit from such a maneuver?”

Winnie shrugged. “Only myself, Victoria, and my uncle. My uncle would still inherit the title if Leo were gone, and Leo would have generously compensated my uncle for agreeing to it. Although I must say, Uncle Ezekiel never did seem keen on being Baron himself. He is forever teasing Leo about producing an heir. He thinks holding the peerage is more trouble than it is worth.”

Mary chuckled. “Your uncle was always known as a bit of a dandy in his younger days. At least that is what’s *on-dit*.”

“And he still is now. I do not think managing an estate is something he desires, nor would he succeed at it. He and my aunt are always in need of funds, and thus breaking the entailment would have greatly benefited them. It would benefit Victoria and me as we would be able to inherit lands in our own right. So, to answer your question, we all would have benefitted, thus I do not know why Leo did not yet set it in motion.”

“But now that Lord Drayton is missing, what will happen to the estate if....”

Mary swallowed as her eyes grew wider. Winnifred’s blood ran cold the moment she realized what Mary’s next question was going to be.

“What if he is not found?” The maid’s eyes were full of compassion, and her countenance marked by worry for Winnie.

“I do not know. If he remains missing then I suppose we will have to find a barrister to manage things? We do not have a steward since the retirement of Mr. Henson, as you know. If Leo were to... if he were If he were to be declared deceased, then my uncle would inherit, and who knows what would become of us. But as it stands, the entire family will be in limbo for a very long time. The

courts move ever so slow, I hear, and everything is tangled up with the business and such.” She cleared her throat. “Let us not speak of such unimaginable events. Come, I wish to search his chamber again and more thoroughly this time.”

Mary grimaced but followed Winnifred down the hall. They turned sharply right at the end of the hall, past the library and the upstairs sitting room, and then she pushed open the double doors that lead into her brother’s chamber.

The chamber always felt cold to her. There was a draft coming through the windows, she knew this, but there was something else about the chamber that gave her chills every time she ventured there.

This space used to belong to her parents. After their death, it remained empty for years. None of the Keatings ever ventured there unless it was by design—to retrieve an item or for some other reason. They never went here without purpose as they might wander into the library or drawing room.

It wasn’t used again until her brother claimed it—as he ought to, given he was the new Baron—four years ago. When Leo decided to merge their father’s spice and tea company with the Duke of Cambarton’s sugar venture, he required a larger study. Soon after claiming their father’s study, he’d moved his belongings into their parents’ chambers. In the process, much of their belongings were given away to charity. He’d also re-opened several of the windows their father had bricked up to avoid the dreaded window tax, resulting in a draft throughout the chamber.

To this day, Winnie never came here unless specifically requested by her brother. He knew better than to ask Victoria to call on him in his chamber, for she outright refused.

“It does not look anything like when my parents occupied these rooms,” she said as she ran one hand along the windowsill. “I used to sit here with my mother every night at sunset. We climbed up on the windowsill, and she would read to me. I remember watching

the sunset in the distance over the park, the orange glow. My mother always said that when the sun set, it spread slumber over the earth and the moon would rise to keep us safe.”

“She was a lovely creature, your mother. So beloved. As was your father.”

Winnifred nodded. It was true. Both of her parents were greatly adored, not just by the servants but by society in general. Her father was an exceedingly generous man who gave freely to many good causes. The Foundlings Hospital was one of his most cherished charities, and he was one of the governors of the institution. Meanwhile, her mother acted as a benefactor for The Asylum for Orphaned Girls. Leo continued to donate to both generously in their name, to this very day.

A lump formed in her throat. She swallowed hard to push it down. Whenever she thought of her parents, sadness overwhelmed her. She hoped one day to think of them without the desire to cry, but that day seemed impossibly far away. Most days, it was easier not to think of them at all.

Such as today. She had no time to waste on nostalgia or grief. Leo had been gone for two weeks already; every moment counted. She spun on her heels.

“Mary, look on his desk. I already searched it, but I did not look inside his books. Look through them while I search his bed chamber. I know he keeps a notebook, I just have not found it yet.”

“But Miss Keating, what am I looking for?”

“Anything containing his handwriting. You may read anything you find, I permit you and—”

Mortification took hold of her as her hand flew to her mouth.

“I am sorry, Mary, I forgot.”

Mary shook her head and looked away. “No matter, Miss Keating, many of us servants don’t know how to read and write.”

Winnifred felt awful. She knew Mary couldn’t read or write. She’d attempted to teach her years ago but to no avail. Winnifred wasn’t quite sure if it was because Mary had trouble retaining what she told her, or if she, Winnie, was simply a terrible teacher. She suspected the second—teaching was not one of her accomplishments.

In either case, Mary discontinued their studies soon enough and no longer showed any desire for it. The awkward silence between them grew thicker and thicker, so much so Winnie wanted nothing more than to escape it.

Winnifred rushed to her brother’s desk and retrieved a handwritten note. His brother habitually kept notes, notepads, and expensive pencils scattered throughout the house in case an idea struck him.

“Here, his penmanship looks like this. Find anything like this and collect it. I shall read it. Thank you, Mary.”

Mary nodded and stepped to the large bookshelf. It was heavy with books about spices, teas, herbs, and their origins. While Seth managed the relationships with their partners, Leo devoted much of his time to the products they sold. He was a wealth of information about teas and herbs—not that Winnie had much interest in such things. She preferred her animals, and to a lesser degree, her novels.

She stepped into his bed chamber. Her stomach clenched when her eyes fell onto the neatly made bed and the stack of books on his nightstand. Everything looked so neat, so perfect—so unlike when her brother was home. He was a bit of a fozler who tended to drop and spill things as he went. Seeing his chamber so tidy made her want to cry.

I cannot be so sentimental. It will not bring Leo back. Perhaps this is why Seth did not wish for me to work alongside him. Maybe he thought I would find myself overcome by emotion at the most inopportune times.

Well, I shall show him. I do not need Seth. I will find Leo on my own and perhaps Rose, too, should their disappearance be connected somehow.

She used the footstool to climb onto her brother's high bed and opened the drawer to his nightstand. She'd glanced at it before, but looking through his things didn't strike her as the right thing to do—until now. And when she pushed back an old, worn copy of the Holy Bible—a gift from their grandmother—she gasped.

There it was. The leather-bound notebook she'd given him as a present for his thirtieth birthday. She knew he kept it close by as he loved the intricate floral design on the front. Her heart raced as she opened it and flicked through the pages.

“Leo, Leo... This is all just about tea and spices... What am I to do with this?” She was about to toss the notebook back into the drawer when a loose page fell out of the back. She gripped it between her fingers so tightly the paper almost tore in half.

Drayton—

We know your secret, and we will spill it. It would be a shame if all your dirty deeds ended up in the scandal sheets, wouldn't it? We are amenable to a one-time payment, to be remitted on Tuesday, June 3rd. Meet at the South entrance of St. Giles's in the Field, Midnight. Do not be late.

She swallowed. Tuesday June 3rd was the day she last saw her brother. The day he disappeared.

What secret is Leo keeping that would take him into the rookeries to keep a blackmailer silent? What terrible thing could be made public about her brother to worry him so much as to lie to me about where he was going? We were to have a family dinner that night. It was his idea. Or did he not know about this when we last spoke?

Winnie didn't know what to do. The note was sent two weeks ago, the meeting would have come and gone. And yet, it was her only

lead. It was clear this was connected to his disappearance. For a moment, she considered calling on her sister, Victoria, but dismissed it at once.

It would do no good. Victoria would never join her on a quest such as this. She was not someone who liked to venture out of the places she knew well. Victoria didn't travel, didn't even go on her own to call on relatives or friends. She would never go to the rookeries of St. Giles with her. No, she'd have to do this on her own.

Winnie tucked the note into her pocket under her blue round gown and rushed back into the study.

"Mary," she called out, "have the coachman ready the carriage. We must go out again. To St. Giles."

"St Giles? Miss Keating, no!"

Winnie shook her head and dashed out of her brother's chamber.

"I must. If His Grace does not help me find Leo, then I must go on my own. And the search takes me to St. Giles. Mary, I will not stop at anything to find my brother. The thought of a life without him scares me more than the thought of venturing into a bad part of town."

"The worst part, Miss Keating. The very worst."

Winnie swallowed but waved a hand, dismissing her maid's worries. "I care not. I would go to Waterloo if I had to."

She turned and dashed down the hall to her chamber to retrieve her pelisse, her heart beating faster than ever. She knew she'd find him, for now at last she had a clue.

Yes, her answers, she was convinced, were in St. Giles. And she'd stop at nothing to find Leo.

Chapter 5

Winnie shivered as she squatted behind a tree across the street from the eerie-looking St. Giles in the Field. The large Venetian windows loomed above her, and when she craned her neck, the beautiful stained glass distracted her—the sun reflected in them, giving the windows a sparkle. Winnifred was a great lover of the arts and architecture, and this church would have held her interest if it wasn't for the very purpose of her visit—to find her brother.

She pulled her cape up higher as she surveyed the area. St. Giles was even scarier than she'd anticipated, and a part of her regretted coming here alone. She ought to have brought Mr. Markham, or preferably, Seth. She'd feel so much better if she had him by her side. Not just because she harbored such deep feelings for him but because he was a tall, burly man who inspired respect and reverence in anyone who met him.

On the other hand, she was but a small, slight lady, and from the characters she'd spotted thus far, it would not serve her well. St. Giles was well known for the many flophouses, courtesans, and elbow crookers. Winnie shuddered as she thought of the wretched structures that served as homes to these poor people. People patched up broken windows with rotten boards or paper, clothes hung out of windows to be dried, only to be splattered with dirt and sewage that ran down the street.

The stench penetrated her nose, and she pinched it shut with her thumb and index finger. The squalor in St. Giles was horrifying. Across the street, a young girl no more than two-and-ten rushed past. Her hair hung wildly around her face, and when Winnie looked down, she saw she wasn't wearing shoes. On her hip was a little child, his face covered in dirt.

What horror. To live in such a way and to have no option of ever improving one's life... I will remember this whenever I feel melancholy

about my circumstances in life. The worst I am faced with is the prospect of being an old maid. But these people? They are condemned by fate to live in this squalor.

She was considering what she and her brother might be able to do for these people when she had to jolt herself back to reality. Her brother was missing. She was here to find him, not to embark on a charity mission.

She checked the area once more. The location in the letter had been the church, but she was sure this wasn't the intended meeting place. It was too open for any clandestine meeting.

Suddenly, movement caught her attention. She squinted just as a group of men exited the small, wooden shack of a home across the street. Like the other homes on the road, it too was in ill repair. A rag covered a window, and the front door appeared off its hinges as one of the men lifted it slightly to close it.

The men were dressed in black pantaloons, simple white shirts, and black waistcoats. Upon their heads were black caps. Something about the men drew her attention. She wasn't sure why, but out of all the buildings on the street, it was nearest to the church and the only one that showed any activity in the last half hour. Plus, the men...There was something peculiar about them.

As the men disappeared around the corner, Winnie got up and rushed across the street. It couldn't hurt to take a look, she figured. She stood on her tiptoes and pushed the rag aside to peek inside. The room was dark, and the smell of rotten wood wavered out and irritated her nose.

Should I try the front door? No, it would not be a good idea to attempt it. I saw how the man struggled with the door when they exited; if there's anyone inside, they might hear. Am I fit for Bedlam to even consider going inside? I do not even know if this is the right house...

It didn't matter, she had to go and check. This was her only clue. Determined, she headed around the back of the house and through

the dirty yard. Chickens clucked, and garbage littered the ground as she made her way toward the back door, her gown dragging on the ground. The pale blue hem quickly turned black, and she chided herself for not picking it up as she walked. It was too late now, anyhow.

Winnie pushed open the back door and stepped inside the house. It was dark, just like the room she'd spotted through the window. The scent of rotten wood mingled with the rank scent of tallow candles. Dust hung thick in the air and covered every surface she passed. Her heartbeat was so fast she thought she could hear it.

"A good day, eh wot?" A voice suddenly called out. She shrank back and banged into the wall behind her. Winnie stood still, taken aback by someone still being in the house. She'd know it was a possibility, of course, but she'd hoped she could look around in peace.

"Good day indeed, Morris. That young man is now a little less flush in the pocket while my pockets are filled with gold!" The second voice cracked as the man laughed out loud. The sound of banging followed as if someone was slamming their fist on the table in delight.

"I say, he looked like a proper strait-laced gent, but it's always those, the arrogant ones too high in the instep, that are the easiest to cheat out of their coin. They think they're better than us, but we show them every time!"

"We do! More ale, Morris?"

Winnie realized she'd been holding her breath for almost the entire time she'd listened to the conversation. Letting out the air she took a step forward. She had no idea who these men were, but they spoke of someone who wasn't from St. Giles, the description made it clear. Someone who came here to gamble, whom they'd cheated?

She frowned. Many middle-class gentlemen, as well as some lords, ventured to the rookeries to indulge in drink or gambling, she

knew, but Leo wasn't among those.

Her curiosity was piqued. She slowly made her way forward and went down a hall. The darkness here was more severe as there were no candles lit at all, and the windows were boarded up. The only light came from the room up ahead, the one containing the voices. As she made her way forward, she ran one hand along the wall to steady and guide herself when—

“Oww, watch it.” A voice hissed at her. She looked up and gasped when she recognized the owner of the voice, hidden in the shadows.

“Seth?”

He reached forward and placed his hand in front of her mouth, and pulled her back into another little chamber she hadn't yet noticed. The feeling of his hand on her mouth filled her with a myriad of emotions. She'd never been so close to Seth as she was now. The scent of lavender water enveloped both of them as she felt his heartbeat against her back.

“Be quiet,” he whispered as he removed his hand. “They'll kill us if they see us.”

Winnie's eyes grew wide. She hadn't considered that this was particularly dangerous. Of course, venturing into someone's home was not the done thing, but she hadn't thought herself at grave risk.

“Who are these people? And what are you doing here?” She asked quietly, but he placed a finger on his lips and shook his head.

“Listen,” he whispered and pointed toward the room containing the two men.

They continued standing pressed together in the small chamber adjacent to what had to be the kitchen. The room contained a small table in the corner, and a broken wooden chair, nothing else. It was a study, or had been at one point.

“Elton has a few new Birds of Prey at the flophouse. Did you visit?” Morris asked.

“Eh? Nah. Don’t like those broads Elton brings in. They’re vile creatures with commonplace minds.”

Morris roared with laughter. “Commonplace minds? Peter, you are a peculiar fellow. The likes of us ought not to care about the minds of those women. They’re conveniences, and those fine lords like to pay handsomely for their company.”

“Those gents. Fancy themselves all prim and proper as they sit in the House of Lords doing Prinny’s bidding, taxing the common man out of house and home, while getting richer and richer themselves. And then, at night, when nobody’s looking, they sneak off to St. Giles and enjoy the services of these so-called Birds of Paradise. I’d never.”

Winnie’s face burned with embarrassment. She would have been disturbed by their talk if she’d been alone. With Seth standing beside her, she was downright mortified to have to listen to such an address.

“Who are these men?” She whispered to Seth to do away with the awkwardness between them.

“Peter, you are one of a kind. Surely have high standards for someone in your line of work,” Morris said up ahead.

“I do what I must to support myself and my family,” he replied. “Now, gimme some more of that ale. Don’t hog it all.”

“I’m not hogging anything, and this ale is mine. Get your own.”

“It ain’t yours. Now, gimme!” The voices grew louder as the two men argued back and forth over the ownership of the ale.

“They’re useless to our purposes,” Seth quietly said. He was so close

to her goosebumps covered her arms, and then his deep baritone voice filled her ear. "Come on, let's go." He took her by the arm and gently nudged her toward the back door. Suddenly, the sound of chairs screeching across the floor from the kitchen drew both their attention.

"What piffle," Seth cursed and yanked her backward. She stumbled and grabbed on to Seth and righted herself. For an instant, her fingers curled around his muscular arms. "Are you all right?"

She nodded as together they huddled pressed against the wall of the study, neither of them moving, neither of them daring to breathe. The door to the kitchen opened with a loud creak, and footsteps sounded.

"Come on then, Elton wants us at the square. We're already late," the one named Morris said.

"It ain't my fault we're late. You're the one who insisted on counting your coins three times as if I'd cheat you out of your share."

"Done it before, haven't you?"

"Balderdash, leave me be. I've had enough of you and your mawkish mood today," Peter moaned as the two men passed by the study. Their voices faded as they made their way to the front door. One man grunted as he lifted the door, opened it, and then popped it back in place.

Seth and Winnie stood still for another minute to make sure they didn't return, and then Winnie turned to Seth.

"What are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same. I'll tell you but not here, not now. Come on, let's get going." He nodded for the back door and pushed past her. There was something odd about him. As if he were not entirely

unhappy to see her. And at the same time, he was irritated by her presence.

Winnifred frowned and followed Seth outside. As the sunlight enveloped her once more, she blinked. Before her, Seth was but a silhouette. Her eyes adjusted to the brightness of the day.

“Winnifred, what were you doing here? I told you I didn’t want you joining me in my investigation. I was very clear—I must do this on my own. You could have ruined everything,” Seth’s tone was full of accusation, which in turn enraged Winnie.

“You did make yourself rather clear, crystal clear, I declare. But ‘pon my honor, I did not trail you. I didn’t know you were here. I came here following my investigation and my clues.”

He crossed his arms in front of his broad chest and blinked at her. His bright eyes sparkled with a mixture of curiosity and suppressed anger.

“And what, pray, where those clues?”

She tilted her head to one side and, for a split second, considered not telling him. After all, he refused to help her, so why should she share anything she knew? However, she realized how silly that was and how damaging this attitude might be to her brother’s safety.

With a sigh, she yanked up her reticule and retrieved the folded-up note she’d found among Leo’s belongings. She handed it to Seth, who took it with a groan. As he unfolded it, she watched his eyes move as he read the words before him. His mouth opened, first only a slight bit, enough to see a hint of his white teeth, and then it hung agape. When he raised his eyes again, he was entirely pale.

“What is it?”

He swallowed and slipped a hand into his waistcoat pocket. Seth pulled out a folded piece of paper and handed it to Winnifred

without saying anything.

Chapter 6

"They're identical," she said, as she scanned the words on the sheet he'd found among his sister's papers. Rose was a rather scatter-brained young lady, and her writing desk reflected this state of mind. It took Seth several hours to work his way through the entirety of her messy desk, and he had yet to search the rest of her bed-chamber or her dressing room. He didn't look forward to the prospect, not wishing to violate his sister's privacy.

It was Seth's hope this letter would lead him to where he'd find her, avoiding the need of having to go into her chamber to look around in detail. Alas, it seemed this was a dead end. Not only had he wasted the entire afternoon, he now had to contend with Winnie.

To come upon her so unexpectedly, in this shack of all places, was quite shocking enough, but then to feel her so close to me, so close I felt her breath, her sweet breath, on my skin is most unsettling. What am I to do? I cannot very well refuse to join forces with her now when there's undeniable evidence the disappearance of our siblings is connected. But she will distract me, and that could be deadly—I ought to know.

She handed the letter back and pressed her lips together. She surveyed the area before crossing her arms.

"We must go. We ought not to linger on the property for too long. It is not a good idea. There is a courtyard on the other side of St. Giles in the Field, we can sit there and speak."

He was about to protest—she was not the one making the decisions here—but really, he had no reason to deny, her idea was a good one. The longer they lingered here, the likelier they'd be found out. He gave her a curt nod and indicated for her to proceed.

She rushed across the street as he followed. Seth already found

himself distracted by the elegance of her stride and the sparkle of the sunshine upon her skin.

He groaned as he pushed the thoughts away. These kinds of feelings never led to anything good. He knew it.

She stopped in the courtyard next to the church and sat on the stone bench under the stained-glass windows of the beautiful old church. He sat beside her, leaving enough space not to make her uncomfortable or bring her reputation into unnecessary danger. Not that it mattered. Nobody in St. Giles knew them, the etiquette that governed the life of the aristocracy did not matter here. This was a different world, one so far removed from their lives it was difficult to accept that they were still in the same city.

“When did you find your letter?” Winnie asked the moment they sat down.

“Yesterday. I returned from Devon and found Rose had been gone for several days, almost two weeks. I didn’t find out until I got back as nobody thought it prudent to tell me.”

He realized from the way she shifted her head and narrowed her eyes that he ought to explain.

“Rose and I had a disagreement before she left. I suggested that it might be time for her to find a match, and she disagreed. I’d found what I thought was a great match with a fellow Duke, no less. Yet, she acted as though I’d suggested she marry Napoleon himself. The argument was not resolved before I left, and the servants assumed she’d come after me to set things right. She didn’t, of course. So when I returned and found her missing, I was frantic, as you can imagine.”

Winnie said nothing but stared ahead into the distance. She was aware, of course, that Seth and Rose were not truly close. It was well known among their friends and neighbors. They were agreeable. No, they were more than agreeable. Agreeable was a word he would use to describe Victoria and Winnifred. He loved

Rose; she was, after all, his only family. They were simply not at all alike and thus not close. This fact might account for her reaction to his proposal.

He observed Winnifred. Her long, elegant neck turned from side to side as she considered his words.

“They must be together. Do you not agree?”

He nodded. “Given that Leo received the same letter as Rose, yes. I would assume they are.”

Winnie nodded again. Suddenly, her lips turned up into a small smile.

“Given what we’ve uncovered, do you not think we ought to work together? Our siblings disappeared on the same day and were taken presumably by the same people. Plus, someone blackmailed them. It is the most logical of approaches.”

Seth leaned his head back so far, his eyes looked directly at the bright summer sky. White, fluffy clouds moved slowly across the heavens. They were of the kind that would inspire creative minds to see shapes in them. Seth was not of a creative mind, his mind worked on logic. He loved numbers, charts, things that made sense. The abstract puzzled him.

“Seth, I know you are opposed to my helping you, but I will investigate this matter anyhow, and we are sure to come across one another just as we did today. So, why not join forces?”

His head snapped forward as he exhaled sharply.

“I suppose. But I will have you know, this is not child’s play. I will not rest until I’ve recovered my sister and Leo.”

She glared at him. “I did not think this child’s play. Leo is my brother, my best friend.”

Seth nodded. He knew how close Winnie and Leo were. Leo often spoke of Winnie as though she were his twin. He envied them their close relationship sometimes. The two were rather alike, which perhaps accounted for their closeness. While he loved Rose dearly, they were not alike in the least. Where he was tidy, organized, rigid even, she was disconcerted and free-spirited.

His mind insisted upon resurrecting images from his past, images from a time when he, too, had a best friend. Someone he shared everything with, someone who was as close to him as Winnie was to Leo. While he and Leo were close, and Leo knew some of his deepest secrets, there was always a distance between them, one of Seth's creation.

He shook his head and chased the thoughts out of his mind. This was why he didn't want to work with her. She distracted him without meaning to. She brought feelings and memories back to the surface he'd rather forget. Alas, it could not be helped. She was right. If they didn't work together, their siblings would be lost, perhaps forever.

"Very well then, Winnie. What do you suggest we do about this gang?"

"Gang?" The surprise in her voice startled him. Did she not know that the house they'd just been in was the den of a gang? It was apparent to him from the moment he stepped foot into it.

"Yes... I thought you realized when you read the letter sent to Leo that a gang most likely took him."

"A... A gang? Do you mean like bandits?"

"Yes, of course. I suspected my sister had run away when I first discovered she was missing, but when I saw this letter, it demanded money in exchange for silence. That is the way these gangs operate. And then to request a meeting here, in the rookery...."

She paled, and her green eyes grew wider and wider. Somewhere in

the distance, children kicked a can down the street. A woman hollered at her husband from a window above, berating him over his drinking. He studied the area. This was not a good place for them to talk.

The two of them stood out like sore thumbs in this area. Winnifred in her delicate gown and handsome turban adorned with feathers and a gemstone, and he in his best new pantaloons and fine, burgundy-colored waistcoat and top hat.

He got up and extended his hand to her.

“We ought to go. This is not the right place for us. We are already drawing attention.”

Winnie glanced around, and at once, her back stiffened as she realized they were not alone. A confederacy of men congregated around the area, and several stared at them.

“You are right. We ought to go. But where to?”

He pointed toward an ally across the street they’d come from moments ago. “My carriage is there. Yours?”

She pointed to the opposite side of the church.

Seth rubbed his chin and considered. If they were to figure out what happened to their siblings, she needed to understand just what kind of danger they were facing. It wouldn’t do any good for them to waste time.

“We will go to your coachman and ask him to follow my carriage to Lester House. We can talk further there. You will ride in the carriage with me.”

Without hesitation, she got up, and they walked across the

courtyard and toward her carriage. Seth watched her speak to the coachman, who narrowed his eyes at him. Seth was well aware that riding in his carriage with Winnifred was more than unusual. It was scandalous almost, but he didn't care. He never really cared much for society's silly rules, but he especially didn't care now.

Once he and Winnie were seated in his carriage, he cleared his throat.

"What do you know about gangs?"

Her lips parted, and he knew the answer even before she gave it. Nothing. She knew nothing.

"I know organized crime is entirely out of control, and the constables cannot manage. I know the Bow Street Runners do not dare go into the rookeries. And I know some noblemen like to visit places like this for some rather unsavory activities, run by gangs. Activities Leo most certainly did not participate in."

He shrugged. So, she knew *some* things. Even better.

"I agree. I cannot see Leo mixed up with this lot. Especially not now that we know he and Rose received the same letters. No, I venture to say that a gang took them. The only thing I haven't figured out yet is why we haven't received a ransom notice." He paused and pursed his lips. "You do realize the house we just exited from was a gang den, yes?"

"What do you mean? I... I thought I was looking for the person who sent the blackmail demand to Leo."

"Right, which was likely sent by the gang." Irritation pushed its way up from his stomach. Hadn't he just gone over all of this? "Among the activities you mentioned, kidnapping and blackmail are high on the list of actions gangs engage in with frequency. When I came here and looked at the shack, it was clear to me what it was."

Winnie blinked her beautiful green eyes at him and flushed red.

I embarrassed her because she didn't know. But how could she? She's a high-born young lady who doesn't have anything to do with this sort of thing. Heavens, I hardly know my way around these parts, and it is only through my interest in crime novels that I even know as much as I do.

"Anyhow, I am sure the two we encountered are some lower-level members of the gang. I am hopeful that Mr. Markham can uncover more."

Winnie shook off her discomfort and nodded at him. "I suppose I ought to tell him that Leo received the same letter Rose did."

Seth shifted in his seat and crossed his legs, eyes peeled out of the window at the passing city. They were out of St. Giles now and entered into Covent Garden, and from there, they would make their way back to St. James' where Seth lived. In the distance, the sun still bathed the world in its beautiful glow, and the sound of sparrows filled the air.

"Seth?"

"Yes. I did tell him there was a letter, although I did not allow him to keep it. Either way, I do not think it will make much of a difference. I've asked him to run his investigation while I will continue mine, alongside you, as you wish. We may tell him about your letter, but you ought to know I requested that he search for Leo while looking for Rose."

"You did?" The disbelief in her voice hurt him. Did she think him so cold and calculating as only to wish to search for his sister and not his friend as well? He shook his head. He wanted to appear aloof—it was the only way he could distance himself from becoming too involved with Winnie. The fact she showed surprise at this news only meant his plan was working. Distance. He needed distance.

"Of course. Now. We've established a general timeline already as to what happened when. I surmise that Rose and Leo both went to the

meeting place and either refused to pay the blackmailer or the letters were a ruse, and they were taken. But we do not know which is correct.”

Winnie shook her head. “Or if either is correct. To figure out what happened to them, we must first find out what it was they were keeping secret. What was it they were each doing they could be blackmailed over? We already concluded gambling is out of the question.”

Seth leaned back and looked out of the window once more. They passed St. James’ Park and were about to turn onto Park Place. When the carriage stopped, he hastened out and extended his hand to Winnie. The feeling of her hand in his always gave him a jolt. Secretly, he enjoyed riding in a carriage with her and Leo because it always gave him an excuse to touch her in an innocent way that wouldn’t give away his true feelings for her.

As she exited, he noted once more how small she was. She did not reach up to his shoulder, in fact, he could see the details of her turban easily just by glancing at her. It was this, her vulnerable appearance, that drew him to her the very first time he saw her at Leo’s home. Her personality matched her countenance, amenable, kind, and warm-hearted. These were all qualities that spoke to Seth and made it ever so challenging to keep from pursuing her as he wished he could.

He would never allow himself to, of course. Getting too close to anyone meant opening up to the possibility of pain, of suffering, and he’d had enough of that in his life. So had Rose. Poor Rose.

Sometimes I wish I were a better brother, a better companion. I do not even know what kind of trouble she might have been in. If only there were a way to—

“Zooks! I know. Winnie, did Leo keep a journal of his appointments?”

She nodded at once. “Leo wrote notes all the time about everything;

you know this.”

They ascended the stone staircase toward the heavy oak door. “Of course, but a journal. A detailed one. I am asking because I know Rose kept one. A diary of sorts. It wasn’t a journal to jot down her thoughts as some ladies do. I do not think she would have been able to keep one as her mind tends to wander. That is why she always kept a diary into which she wrote her appointments. She purchased a new leather-bound notebook just a few weeks ago when we went into the city together. She was always an eager scribe. There are other diaries in her room, I am sure.”

“He did keep a journal with important dates, yes. The letter I found was not included in it. It was in another book, the notebook he keeps at his bedside.”

“Ah, one of his books of grand ideas,” Seth nodded with a smile. He liked to tease Leo about the many notebooks he kept. In this case, he hoped his friend did have one place where he wrote down all of his dates, as it would make the search much more effortless than to have to look through his many notebooks.

As they approached the door, it opened as if by magic, and Mr. Rogers, his long-time butler, appeared.

“Your Grace,” he bowed and took Seth’s top hat as well as Winnie’s pelisse. In the sunrays that streamed through the large French windows of the drawing room, a red tinge against her pale skin gave her the appearance of timeless beauty, the kind one saw in paintings. He recalled seeing a portrait of Eleanor of Provence, the dark-haired, bright-eyed Queen Consort of Henry III. It was an artist’s impression of what the Queen looked like, and he was mesmerized by it at the time. Winnie always reminded him of this remarkable beauty.

“Miss Keating will remain here with us for a while. She will assist me in looking for my sister. Please ensure the cook knows to plan accordingly.”

Rogers nodded and departed, leaving Seth to direct Winnie upstairs to the chamber occupied by his sister.

“I would much rather not look through her personal belongings, but it must be done. I suppose, given Leo’s erratic system, we shall have to look through his datebook as well as his notes. Rose only kept one diary. For someone as ill-organized as her, it always amazed me that she could keep to having just one diary and keeping it updated. At least, I hope it is.”

Winnie followed him down the hall on the second floor. The dark green carpet with its rich golden border and intricate gold design running down the middle swallowed the sound of their footsteps as they approached Rose’s chamber.

Seth opened the door to the chamber and realized he’d never once ventured into the room without his sister present. Never. And he ordinarily never would have, but these circumstances called for it.

He motioned for Winnie to enter, and as she passed him, the sweet scent of lavender drifted into his nose. He smiled as she passed and then followed. However, the moment he stepped into his sister’s chamber, he froze in place.

He’d forgotten about the painting hanging above her fireplace. He could never force himself to look at the painting, even though he knew exactly what was depicted in it.

And as he raised his eyes, he realized Winnifred had seen it, too. Her eyes were glued to the spot above the fireplace, and when he came to a stop beside her, she turned her head, very slowly.

She’d seen it. As her lips parted, he could hear her questions already, before she even uttered them. The answers, Seth was not prepared to give.

Chapter 7

There were two of them. Two Seths. Winnie could hardly believe her eyes as she looked from the painting above the fireplace to Seth and back again. Yes, it was him; it was unmistakable.

The painting was large, large enough to show three figures. In the middle was a younger version of Lady Rose. She could be no more than two-and-ten in it, but it was her. She had the same heart-shaped mouth and deep, penetrating eyes. Beside her stood a young Seth, no more than five-and-ten. He was dressed in a pair of beige trousers and a tailcoat; his brown hair hung loosely around his shoulders. And there, standing on Rose's other side, was an almost identical version of Seth, beaming down at her.

In the background was the outline of a house located near a lake, and trees suggested the surrounding landscape.

She blinked, so mesmerized was she at this. Was this some artistic depiction of Rose and Seth, or was there another sibling she didn't know about? Seth's family moved to London some twelve years ago, when the late Duke was still alive. Their mother had passed away by then. Even though Leo and Seth didn't go into business together until four years ago, they had been friends from the time Seth moved to London with his family. She knew there was an estate somewhere in Derbyshire, but neither Seth nor Rose ever spoke much of their life before London.

Was this why?

"This...This is..." Her words trailed off, too shocked by the discovery.

"My twin brother, David. He passed away." She noticed the great effort he took not to look at the painting himself and felt instantly

terrible for drawing his attention to it. “The same year this painting was created. A month later.”

“I am so sorry, Seth. I didn’t know.”

He looked at her, a sad smile on his lips. “Of course not. Nobody does. We do not speak of him. Leo knows I had a brother, but that is all. Other than that, we do not share this information. That is one of the few things Rose and I always agreed on. We might be different in character, but when it comes to David, we agreed. We do not speak about him. So, please... If you would not ask me anything else....”

His voice sounded thick as if it took an incredible amount of strength even to speak at all. The sorrow and grief radiated off of him with such force, Winnie felt it in her bones. The desire to rush to him and hug him, comfort him, was almost overwhelming, but she knew it would be the wrong thing to do. He needed distance.

And so, Winnie did the only thing she could. She changed the subject from Seth’s deceased sibling to the one missing. It was with horror that she realized the magnitude of what Seth had to experience right now. He’d already lost a brother. There was no way he could lose a sister as well, not without destroying him, and that Winnie could never allow.

“Very well. I have no right to ask, and you are under no obligation to tell me anything. Let us instead concentrate on the task at hand.”

She assessed the chamber and sighed. Rose was not a tidy person. This much she’d already known from the lady’s own admission. Her chamber was in good order, or in as much order the maid could put it in, but there were hints of the lady who occupied it.

However, when Winnifred stepped to the writing desk by the window, she saw piles upon piles of books and assorted quills, ink pots, pencils, and paper.

“Have you looked here yet?” she asked Seth.

When he didn't answer, she glanced back and found him looking up at the painting. He realized she was looking at him and tore his gaze away, a look of embarrassment on his visage as if she'd caught him doing something he wasn't supposed to.

My heart aches for him as the pain is clear to see in his eyes. I wish he'd tell me what happened to his brother, for I believe perhaps much of who he is and how he acts these days is connected to it. Alas, I cannot force him. It is as I told him. I have no right.

He swallowed and walked over to her. “I've not examined it in detail. I searched it for a hint of anything out of the ordinary, which is how I found the note, but I feel somewhat reluctant to look at her things and read her private thoughts. Perhaps it might be better if you did. You are a lady, after all. Should there be anything in her books that is... that a gentleman should not know...”

He colored a deep red. Winnie could only imagine what kind of things he expected to find among his sister's things. She pursed her lips. It was understandable, in a way. One never knew what one's siblings might be hiding. In her case, she'd been almost sure she'd not find anything too shocking in Leo's possessions once they went to her home to look there.

“I understand how you feel. I am not worried about Leo's secrets as I am sure they cannot be so terribly shocking. I know him well, and I must say I am surprised anyone would blackmail him. He is so strait-laced, it is impossible to think of him being blackmailed.”

Seth nodded. “I agree. Leo is such a transparent kind of person... And I know him well. I am sad to say I cannot say the same about my sister. She is somewhat of an enigma to me. We are not that close....”

Winnie stepped forward and picked up a leather-bound diary. It was a simple diary, not as adorned as Leo's, and when she flicked it open, she saw Rose's neat, tight handwriting filled the pages with

dates and appointments, as well as a summary of what she'd done on those days. It wasn't a diary—Seth was right. These were not deep thoughts, simply notes along the lines of, *went to menagerie with Hester, saw a new lion, just arrived. Frightful. Will return next week.*

She glanced up at Seth.

"I am much the same when it comes to Victoria. I do not know her at all well. If it were she who was blackmailed, I'd have a much easier time believing she has secrets to hide, as she never tells me anything. I could not tell you how she passes her time, other than going out to balls until the early hours and tending to her horrible little pug."

To her surprise, Seth chuckled.

"Pugsley?"

"You've met him?" She smiled at him.

"I've had the misfortune, yes. The feisty little beast. I adore all animals, but that little guy is rather a troublesome one."

"Indeed, he is. It is because Victoria will not call him to order. She treats him like a child, allows him to do anything he pleases, anytime he pleases. He has taken to eating my shoes when I do not put them away. Last week I caught him eating my favorite straw bonnet. 'pon my honor, I hope Victoria is a better mother to her eventual children than she is to the dog, for otherwise, she will bless this world with true little devils."

Seth broke out into a laugh, a sound so unfamiliar it startled her.

"Has Leo told you what Pugsley did to me?"

She frowned. "No, what happened?"

He wiggled his index finger. "I shall show you; wait a moment." He dashed out of the room. His footsteps echoed for a while and then faded as a door opened and closed. As she waited, she took the opportunity to examine the painting above the fireplace once more as she hadn't been able to study it in detail while Seth was there. It was apparent it caused him pain to look at it.

Her heart ached for him. Whatever happened to his brother, David, had to be traumatic enough never to want to speak of it or him.

In the painting, she studied the young man's face. He looked just like Seth, except his nose was shorter, and his blond hair appeared a shade darker than Seth's. While Seth's hair reminded her of fresh straw, a yellow tinge running through it, his brother's was almost white in its starkness. She wondered if he genuinely looked like that or if it was the artist's version.

She examined the house behind the Dunn children in more detail.

Is this their Derbyshire estate?

It had to be. It looked quite lovely and quaint. To go from living somewhere like that to living in London had to be a shock.

She scratched her chin and directed her attention back to the diary in her hand. Just as she flicked it open, a door opened again in the distance, and Seth's footsteps returned. A small smile played along his lips when he entered, and he held out a book to her.

"This is what remains of *Waverly* after Pugsley made himself familiar with it last month."

She took the book and gasped. The edges were entirely chewed up, and pages halfway ripped out of it.

"Goodness, that is what he does to my shoes and hats." She handed the novel back with a bemused shake of the head. "I will say, more remains of your novel than of my bonnet."

Somehow as they conversed, it felt like the heaviness that lingered in the air between them lifted. And for an instant, she almost forgot why they were here.

It was so easy talking to him. This was one of the reasons why she was so ardently in love with him. Even though Seth liked to keep to himself and was challenging to get to know, on those rare occasions when he broke out of his shell, he was funny, charming, and utterly interesting. She never conversed with him so intimately, of course, they were usually in the company of others.

“Were you able to finish it before Pugsley got ahold of it?”

He shook his head. “I am sad to say I was not. I was about halfway through before he so violently defaced it. I will have to pick up another copy. I ought to give this one to the servants to throw in the fire, but I don’t particularly appreciate throwing books away. It feels...”

“Sacrilegious,” Winnie said with an eager nod.

He smiled at this. “I would not go quite so far, but yes, it feels very wrong. “My father and mother were both very fond of books. It is one of the fondest memories I have of them, taking turns reading to us. However, Rose does not care for novels much. She collects them, but doesn’t read them. They are an investment, she says.”

“Leo does not read novels, either. He collects books about tea, and sugar. Spices and cookbooks. Nothing remotely creative. He’s much fonder of the theater or the opera. As of late, the ballet.”

Seth rolled his eyes. “Rose has a rather disturbing obsession with the ballet of late as well. We do not often venture out into town together, we are not that close, but she did attempt to force me to attend the ballet with her. I valiantly resist it.”

“I was not so lucky. Leo insisted that both Victoria and I attend the ballet with him for his birthday. “

Seth cringed. "My sincere condolences. But it seems you passed the evening without lasting effects."

"Perhaps because I fell asleep midway through the performance. "

The two smiled at one another, and just as Winnifred was about to carry on the banter, his face darkened.

"Have you had the opportunity to look at my sister's diary?"

Winnifred's shoulders slumped forward. "Not yet, I shall do so now."

He gave her a nod and crossed the room.

"While you are occupied with that, I will look through some of her books. Not that she reads them, but I shall look anyhow. If there was other correspondence from the blackmailers, she might have hidden the notes rather than leave it out for one of the maids to find."

He turned his back to her without even waiting for a reply from Winnie. She sighed. The heaviness between them had returned. She could not shake the feeling that somehow Seth was angry with her.

His moods change so quickly. Has it always been like this? I know he has never been an easy-going kind of fellow, but he is not usually quite in such high dudgeon. Of course, your sister is not missing.

Winnie shook her head, sat down on the plush chair near Rose's desk, and flicked through the booklet. She did keep very detailed notes. However, there was nothing of particular interest in the diary.

She saw a physician a month ago; she had an appointment to visit the circulating library with a friend, followed by a visit to the Royal Menagerie, but nothing, nothing at all that suggested even in the slightest that she was keeping a secret someone would blackmail

her over. Winnie took one of Rose's pencils and a page of writing paper. She quickly made a list of how often she'd attended the various social functions and then sat up straight. She placed the book in front of her.

"Any luck yet?" Seth asked from the other side of the room.

Winnie shook her head. "No, not yet. The only clear thing is that Rose was much too busy to be blackmailed." She glanced at him, hoping to restore some of their earlier effortlessly conversations, but failed. Seth stared at her. Winnie picked up the paper and waved it in his direction. "I am making a list of how many times she is visiting the opera and other locations."

He pursed his lips but said nothing as he proceeded to flick through another book.

She ignored his mood and paged through the book once more but then dropped it again. Outside, the sky darkened as the sun started its descent for the day. Her eyes burned from the strain of reading through the book, and she rubbed them.

Behind her, she heard Seth moving again. He picked up book after book and flipped through each for the past hour or so, only to return every single one to the shelf with a heavy sigh. She glanced over her shoulder, their eyes met, and she quickly looked away.

"So, tell me. Just how busy a social life did Rose have?" he asked. The brisk tone bothered her, but she pushed the vexation aside.

"The diary, for that is what this is, started in March. Since then, I have noted weekly visits to Almack's on Wednesdays, six visits to the opera, seven to the ballet, and five to the Royal Menagerie. This is the only odd thing I noticed."

He raised one eyebrow. "The Menagerie? She is fond of animals."

"Yes, but she did not visit there at all between March and May. She

only developed a passion for it this past month or two.”

Seth shrugged. “I told you my sister is very socially active. She is, as they say, a diamond of the first water. Adored wherever she goes.” There was a bitterness in his voice she couldn’t quite place. Suddenly she found herself overtaken by a yawn.

“Are you tired?” he, asked sharply.

She shook her head. “No, I think it’s just my eyes that are growing heavy from the reading.”

“Perhaps you should take a rest. If you continue pushing yourself, you will only miss things. And we cannot have that. In an investigation such as ours, nothing can be missed. If you must rest, do so, and I shall continue. Perhaps I should look through Rose’s book again anyhow. If you are tired, you may have already missed something.”

Is he determined to quarrel with me? For it certainly seems that way. I cannot understand him. He is so secretive, and his mood so changeable. And yet, I cannot help but be drawn to him.

She got up and handed him the book.

“Here it is. If you are fearful that I might’ve missed something, you really ought to look at it again. But I assure you, I have missed nothing. In fact, your day has been as long as mine, and you have been just as vexed. Perhaps I ought to re-inspect all the books you have already gone through to make sure you have not missed anything.”

She tilted her head to one side and blinked at him, knowing that the way she spoke to him was entirely uncouth. She was, after all, only the sister of a Baron—and he was Duke.

However, when it came to Seth, she always had trouble staying within the boundaries set for her by society. It was a somewhat

blurry line, it couldn't be denied. Seth was, after all, her brother's friend, and she heard the way they spoke to one another. There was no difference between the two of them when they were together. They talked to one another as though they were simply too young men without a title, without the burden of being peers of the realm.

Thus, she often thought of Seth as her equal—not her better. But of course, he was her better, a Duke, and one of the highest-ranking peers in England. It was one of the many reasons why she had to remind herself of proper etiquette, even in this situation.

No matter how strongly her heart desired it, the two of them could never be anything more than acquaintances—connected only by way of her brother.

By Jove... What am I to do?

She shook her head and turned away from the man she loved but couldn't have, to concentrate on the man whose life was in peril—her brother. Behind her, Seth lingered. She felt the way he stared at her even though she couldn't see it. Inside her, a heat rose, but she shook it away. She had to get Seth out of her mind. For good.

Chapter 8

I knew I should not have allowed her to join this investigation. I knew it. But I have been a fool. I have convinced myself that it would be helpful to have her by my side. But in reality, she is a distraction. Just as I feared. We have wasted at least half of an hour bantering back-and-forth. Half an hour that we could have spent searching for our siblings. Looking for clues. But no. Instead, I found myself inspired to show her a battered copy of my book and converse about the dreadful ballet.

Seth shook his head, upset with himself. In addition to being vexed over the general complication that Winnifred's presence bestowed upon him, he was upset for the rudeness he displayed. He never meant to be so unkind to her nor to use such a tone, but he could not control himself around her.

The truth was, Seth had fallen for Winnifred almost the very moment they met. She captivated him right from the start, first with her beauty and then with her wit and kind heart. For the past few years, he'd been able to control these undesirable feelings by keeping his feelings in reserve.

Of course, this was not an easy feat, given that her brother wasn't only his business partner but also his close friend. However, Seth commended himself on keeping from becoming overly involved with Winnifred these past few years. Tonight, however, he was utterly failing.

He turned away from her and flipped through Rose's diary. He already knew that she hadn't missed anything. Winnifred had a sharp mind, and she was rather eagle-eyed. He knew this about her. He said it to...

Why did I say it? To be contrary and push her away? She is not wrong. I am tired. And while she appears bright-eyed, my eyes burn from lack of sleep, reading too much, and from spending too much time in shacks

belonging to gang members—people who have never heard of such a thing as cleaning or airing out the house.

He shuddered as he remembered the stench in the shack. Rotten wood, spilled ale, stale smoke mixed with the unmistakable reek of sewer that clung to all of St. Giles. It disgusted him to even think of it.

He walked over to the chaise lounge that Rose always liked to sit on as she indulged in her sweetmeats. He rested his head back against the cushion, the book in his hands.

Winnie had been right. His sister's diary did not reveal anything of note. Besides her general obsession with society's balls and events, her life was unremarkable in its simplicity. Certainly, nothing that would point to her present predicament.

Quite involuntarily, his head shifted so that he could take in the reflection of Winnifred in Rose's mirror. She sat straight as an arrow, another diary, with a floral design on the front, in her hand. Her shoulders were pulled back, and her chest pushed forward. The delicate fabric of her gown draped her beautiful figure in such a way that he could not help but note the gentle rising and falling off her chest.

His lips turned up into a smile as he watched her. While she read, her right hand rose, and she pulled out one of her black curls from the band at the back of her head. She twirled it around her index finger while chewing on her bottom lip. The warmth spread from his stomach to every part of his body, and his mind wandered to places he knew it should not. For an instant, he wondered what it might feel like to brush his hand through Winnifred's long black hair.

I am sure she looks even more beautiful with her hair cascading down her back, framing her pale face. 'pon my honor, her eyes sparkle in the fading light of the day even more so than usual.

Seth jumped up. No. These were not thoughts he should be thinking

about right now. These kinds of ideas were unacceptable in this situation. In any situation. She spun around and narrowed her eyes at him but said nothing. Good. He could not be drawn into another conversation.

Seth went to the adjacent dressing room, where his sister kept her vast collection of gowns, most of which she never bothered to wear. Their father left them a large inheritance, along with an estate worth almost one hundred thousand pounds per year. An absurd amount by any means. This was before taking into account the income from his joint venture with Leo.

Could this be why? Could Rose's letter have been nothing more than a ruse to get her to go to St. Giles? Was it so she could be kidnapped and a ransom demand made? But it makes no sense, she has been missing for two weeks and I've received nothing. Nothing at all. Rogers is in charge of my correspondence, and he is ever so diligent about it.

He dismissed the thought and wandered through his sister's dressing room. The armoire at the end of the room creaked as he opened the doors.

"By Jove," he muttered at the sight of no less than two dozen pairs of shoes and assorted hats, caps, and bonnets. He found no less than three different redingotes of the same design in a second armoire but in different colors, while five spencers and three pelisses hung up on a rack. He didn't bother to count the gowns.

On a table at the end of the room sat an assortment of pots and patch boxes. These contained what Rose liked to call her 'products', tinctures, makeup, and other things Seth knew nothing about. They, according to his sister, aided her quest to remain eternally beautiful. Seth smiled to himself. She was a great beauty, his sister. She got that from their mother, who was so beautiful even Cleopatra might have grown envious when looking upon her.

"Oh, Mother. Why did you have to fall ill at so young an age? Why could you not have stayed with us? David might still be living if you hadn't died in such a cruel away. Father might be still alive,

too, for I am sure he died of a broken heart.”

Suddenly, painfully aware of the fact he wasn’t alone, Seth stopped talking. He developed the peculiar habit of speaking to himself out loud after the death of David. Up until then, David was the one he’d talk to whenever a thought came to his mind. With him gone, there was simply nobody he could speak to with such ease.

He stepped back into his sister’s chamber and stopped in his tracks.

There, on the chaise, was Winnifred. Her head rested against the pillow he’d used himself only minutes before. She was on her side, positioned in such a way Seth’s eyes were drawn directly to her chest again. Certainly, she’d be mortified at sleeping in so vulnerable a position. He rushed to Rose’s bed and retrieved a wool blanket his sister never used.

Quietly, he returned to the chaise and spread the blanket over Winnie. She shifted as he covered her and the sweet scent that always enveloped her wafted into his nose. She didn’t wake. Good. He didn’t want her to push herself too much—the guilt over chastising her early haunted him, now that he saw how exhausted she was.

He removed the diary from her hand with great care and sat on the floor beside her—another of his odd habits. As he flicked through the journal, he noted this one was from last year. Almost every day was filled with events, even during the months outside of the Season. Despite the lack of social events, his sister found ways to remain active even then. How one person could be quite so busy, he didn’t understand—until he flicked the page and it became painfully clear.

There, on the page titled September 25th, Rose has written only four words. *David. I love you.*

She stayed busy so she didn’t have to think about David. The realization struck him at his core. While he shut himself off, Rose submerged her grief in a flurry of activity.

Seth struggled against the tears that fought their way into his eyes but lost the battle. He tossed the diary on the table and buried his face in between his knees as sobs consumed him. Why did she have to be so sentimental? Why couldn't she be like him, removed and stoic? Would that not be preferable? Unquestionably, it would. He knew it was the only way he managed and—

The sensation came out of nowhere and caused him to jerk forward.

"I am sorry," her voice was drunk on sleep, and her eyes blinked rapidly to drive the fatigue out. "What happened? Have you found anything of..."

"No." he jumped up, freeing himself from the gentle touch of her hand upon his back. He rubbed the back of his hand across his face to hide the tears but failed. She'd already seen. She already knew something was the matter.

"Seth, I..."

"My sister and I are so different. She wears her heart on her sleeve, Winnifred. I kept it locked up. And for good reason." He stopped and looked up at the painting. He picked up the diary with a deep sigh, still open on September 25th, and handed it to Winnie. She glanced at it, then at him, and then at the painting.

"His birthday? No. He...you were twins, so his birthday is yours. April 12th."

"The date he died," he said quietly. There were no more tears; somehow her touch so startled him, it chased away the desire to cry. "Winnie, I haven't told anyone about this. Leo knows I had a brother and that he died. He knows I do not talk about it, but I suppose I ought to tell you. I was unkind when you asked to help me investigate this case. And the reason I gave you was not entirely the truth."

He sat beside her on the chaise as she cast her eyes at him. The green appeared much brighter than he'd previously noticed, almost

like a jade stone.

“It is in part because of David. He and I were like you and Leo, so close. We were twins, of course, so there’s that to consider. But we always did everything together. He was my best friend; we were always kicking up a lark together.” He chuckled as he remembered some of their more boisterous moments. “I never really did anything without him until he died. Ever since then, I haven’t been able to allow myself to become close to anyone genuinely. It’s why Rose and I aren’t that close, and it’s why Leo will call me his best friend, but I never do. I’ve been on my own in many ways since David died, it’s easier that way. No attachments, no...” he shrugged as he looked at her. “I suppose I’m so used to it the idea of sharing this investigation with you scared me.”

She said nothing for a long time, but when she did, her words struck him at his core, even though he’d expected them.

“What happened to him?”

Her voice was so gentle, so quiet, that while her words, her question, wounded him, they soothed him at the same time.

“I was foolish. I had ridden out in bad weather, and a storm came upon me with some ferocity. I managed to return to our estate—Hartford House, in Derbyshire—but when I dismounted, my horse bolted. I adored my horse as he was a beautiful steed and a gift from my late mother. I decided to go after him. David called me a fool for going out in the bad weather, but I could see my horse just up ahead, by a tree. He’d come to a stop. So I went. David warned me to be careful, and I was. Or so I thought. However, as I reached the horse, thunder struck, and he bolted once more. I was rushing after him when lightning struck the tree. I recall the horrid smell. I was far enough from the tree to not suffer terrible injuries but David... You see, he’d followed to help me after all. I didn’t know it, but when the lightning bolt hit the tree, it cracked it and split it down the middle. One half crashed down and...” The words would not come. They would not form. He knew the words *‘the tree fell and crushed David as I watched’* yet they refused to cross his lips.

They didn't need to. Beside him, Winnifred moved closer and placed one hand on top of his. Her long, slim fingers wrapped around his, and they sat this way together for a long time. Neither spoke. Outside, the sun set and the moon rose. Rose's chamber darkened more and more with each passing minute until, at last, the veil of night settled upon them.

It wasn't until Rogers, the butler, passed by outside on the landing and lit the many beeswax candles along the hall that Seth removed his hand from Winnifred's. He looked at her, a smile on his face.

"Thank you."

"I've done nothing."

"You have. You were here. You didn't push me, but instead, just let me be."

Winnifred rose and walked to the door to indicate to Rogers that they, too needed light.

"I've come to understand that sometimes people just need silence."

Seth nodded but could make no reply as Rogers entered and lit the chandelier, pulling the room out of the darkness.

He couldn't remember the last time he told anyone what happened to David, or what his death did to Seth. Leo knew, yes. But he only knew there was once a twin brother, one born two minutes before Seth. A twin brother who, by an accident of birth, would have been Duke while Seth—well. Seth's destiny was unwritten, at least until that terrible day on September 25th.

"It is late, we both require rest. If you like, Rogers can have the maids prepare a guest chamber for you."

To his surprise, Winnifred shook her head. "I cannot. For I've discovered something in Rose's diary."

His mouth dropped open at this.

“You have?”

She nodded and rushed back for the notebook. Suddenly, it was as if he'd never made his grand revelation. As if they hadn't sat side by side, holding hands. Suddenly, there was once again only one goal—the recovery of their siblings. And yet, Seth felt it in his bones. Everything between them had changed—and nothing would ever be as it once was.

However, even that intense realization was overshadowed when he read the words written in his sister's diary. He stared at Winnie open-mouthed. Yes, while he'd fretted over the past, she'd found it. The clue that might just lead to the rescue of Leo and Rose.

Chapter 9

Winnifred pointed at an entry in Rose's journal that had caught her attention, and Seth took it from her hands. He studied it eagerly, his eyes examining the page as she watched him.

She was so surprised by what she saw she'd meant to tell him right away, but then sleep overtook her. Spending hours upon hours poring over the books and trying to make sense of all of Rose's activities made her tired, in addition to the earlier outing to St. Giles.

She studied his face as he continued to read. His confession had startled her, indeed, it had shaken her to her very core. She wanted to say something, anything that might provide some comfort to him, but in the end, she found that simply holding his hand gave him much more relief than any words might have.

I never knew how much he suffered. My parents' deaths were sudden and devastating, but at least I was not there to see it. It was terrible enough to be told how they died, in so horrific a carriage accident, but to have been there? The horrors he must have experienced. The nightmares he must have had all of these years since.

Her heart swelled, and once again, she wanted nothing more than to walk up to Seth and wrap her arms around him, but she knew that now was not the time. She was grateful enough that he had confided in her as he did. If nothing else, she now understood better than ever how important it was to him to find his sister unharmed.

She was, after all, his only family. And without Leo, she too would be left without a family because she knew that she and Victoria would never be close. If anything, once Victoria found a man to set her cap on, she would be married and leave. Likely the sisters would never see each other again.

Seth lowered the journal and looked at her. “Why is Rose writing about your brother? And what is SS?” He raised the journal once more and read. “Saw Leo at O. Leo highly upset about uncle’s involvement in SS.”

Winnifred shrugged. “I thought it curious as well. SS is reference to the business—Sweet and Spice. I saw her use it in other instances, for example, when you hosted your new clients from Bristol. She recorded it as *SS dinner with Bristol clients*. But why she would be talking to Leo about it, I do not understand. And the reference to my uncle....”

Seth wetted his lips. “I know that Leo was a little upset with your uncle because he continued to ask for money. I wonder if this is connected. Did he tell you anything about it?”

Winnie shook her head. “Not in any detail. This note is from several weeks ago, but my uncle is always in the suds and in need of funds. He quite frequently calls on us and requests assistance. I never knew it to vex Leo so much as to discuss it with anybody. Certainly not outside of the family.”

She narrowed her eyes. It seemed strange that Leo would talk to Rose at all. They did not know one another well. Rose was no closer to Leo than Winnifred to Seth. Unless... She glanced up at Seth as a suspicion formed in her mind.

What if Leo and Rose.... No, it was silly. Indeed, if there was anything between the two of them, she would have known. Leo told her everything. And if he were interested in Rose, he would’ve brought the subject up with Seth.

Besides, didn’t Leo speak of considering a courtship with Lady Lorraine? Yes, she was sure of it. He spoke about it the last time Victoria, Winnie, and Leo had dinner together, because Lady Lorraine was a friend of Vicki’s. She decided to keep this theory to herself. Seth had enough on his mind without having to worry about an illicit relationship between his sister and her brother.

“Clearly whatever your uncle asked him vexed Leo enough to confide in Rose.” He flicked through the book again. “Ha! I see. It says here that Rose was at the opera that day. Leo also attended the opera the same evening.”

“He did? How can you be so sure?”

“Because it was an exceptional performance by a visiting opera singer from Italy. She only performed one night, and he could not stop talking about it. I remember it so well because he and I had to travel to Brompton the morning after to meet with a supplier. He would not stop talking about how wonderful the singer was and the excellent high notes she hit. It was rather irritating as he insisted on demonstrating.”

Despite the seriousness of the situation, Winnifred couldn’t help but chuckle. “Yes, Leo does get rather passionate when he is interested in a subject.”

Seth rolled his eyes. “I was ready to relieve the coachman of his duties and take the box seat for myself. I am not interested in the opera in the first place, and even less so when I am subjected to a reenactment by someone who is, I am sorry to say—”

“Entirely tone-deaf.” Winnifred completed the sentence for him.

“Indeed. Well, at least we have a clue. I’m not sure what it means, but it shows a connection between Rose and Leo, beyond the obvious.”

“Perhaps I ought to go speak to my uncle. I already conversed with him once, when I first said I had to look for Leo. I have not talked to him in detail about it. Relations with him can be challenging at times.”

Seth nodded his head. “I know, Leo mentioned it. Your uncle sounds like he can be a little demanding. Yes, let us go and speak to him.”

Winnifred shook her head. "I do not think that is a good idea. He does not know you, so I don't think he would be very inclined to be honest. My uncle is a peculiar fellow. It is better if I speak to him alone."

Seth scrunched up his forehead and pursed his lips. It was evident that he disagreed with her plan. However, this was not up to him. Winnifred knew her uncle well enough. She did not want to tell Seth outright, but her uncle had a dislike of the nobility. At least those higher up in the peerage. He never tired of telling Winnifred how he felt the assorted Earls, Marquess, and Dukes looked down on anyone who was anything less than an Earl.

And she could not entirely disagree with him. The hierarchy within the peerage was very clearly defined. Viscounts and Bats were at the very bottom rungs. She experienced how her father was sometimes treated with less respect than someone higher up simply because he was titled Baron, not Marquess or Duke. If it weren't for his great wealth, she doubted that he would have been respected at all.

And given that her uncle was not even a Baron in his own right, but only the brother of one, and now the uncle of one, she knew that if she arrived at his doorstep with a Duke, he would not tell them anything. If there was anything to tell at all.

"I don't know that that's a good idea. If your uncle is somehow involved in all of this, then we should not risk you going alone."

"I don't think that my uncle is involved. I hope that Leo divulged some information to him that we can use to find him. But in any case, I do not believe a visit to my uncle would be in any way hazardous to me. He may be a peculiar character, but he is not a dangerous man. He's silly above all else. I suppose that comes with being a younger brother. He never did make his way in life himself. He always relied on my father for support."

Her eyes widened and she clapped one hand in front of her mouth, realizing what she had just said.

How foolish of me to say something like that. And just after Seth told me he used to be a younger brother. I hope I have not upset him further.

Seth stood, his lips pressed together, and it was evident he was grinding his teeth. However, when he spoke again, she was relieved that he agreed with her.

“It is the peril of the younger brother. If you are the second in line, the spare so to speak, you are expected to make your way in the world. You are always in the shadow of your older brother, the heir apparent. Having experienced both, I can sympathize with your uncle. It is difficult to find your path in life, especially when you have to watch your older sibling’s path be laid out so clearly in front of him.” He considered her statement for a moment longer before sighing.

“Well. I suppose you are right then. Winnifred, you go call on your uncle, I shall continue looking through my sister’s journals and books. I dread even opening her nightstand. I know how she is. There will be piles upon piles of books and papers contained within it. It will likely take me hours to sort through it.”

Winnifred got up and walked to the window. It was dark outside. The street lights had been lit, but there was still a gloom over the city. It was much too late to call on her uncle now. It would have to wait until morning. She looked over her shoulder at Seth, and suddenly their eyes met. He’d been watching her. She wasn’t quite sure if that made her feel happy or concerned. He was an incredibly challenging man to get to know.

“It is late. We should rest. I will call on my uncle in the morning.”

He gave her a nod. “Of course. You are right. I will have a maid show you to the guest chamber. Unless you wish to return home. I know you do not live far. I could have my carriage take you.”

Winnifred pondered it as she stepped from one foot to the other. Under normal circumstances, she would’ve been rather horrified at the mere suggestion of spending the night in his home. It was

uncouth, yes, scandalous even. She could already imagine the headline in the scandal sheet should anybody find out about this.

The only reason she considered it now was because it was more practical. However, she still harbored the faint, if foolish, hope that Leo might still come home entirely under his own steam and she wanted to be there if that should happen. Besides she needed a change of clothing. The stench of St. Giles clung to her gown, and she craved a hot bath. She didn't like the idea of bothering Mary as it was always a chore to carry up the hot water to her chamber, but she needed it rather badly.

"I shall go home. I will call on my uncle first thing in the morning and then return here. Or if you would like, instead, you can meet me at my home and we can examine my brother's belongings together."

"I shall come to your home. You are right, we ought to look at Leo's things."

Their plans firmed up, Winnifred left. As she stepped out of Seth's home and into the street to wait for the carriage, she shuddered and turned up the collar of her cape.

Standing out here in the night, she could not ignore the peculiar feeling in her stomach as if everything was not right. In addition to her brother's absence, of course. There was something else. Something sinister lingered in the air. As her carriage drove up she couldn't help but feel as though she was being watched. The feeling remained with her all the way back to her own home, crept into her bones and would not leave. Not even after her so-desired bath. Something awful was going to happen—she just knew it.

Chapter 10

Seth paced back and forth in his chamber the following morning. It was barely after seven o'clock, but he had already been awake for three hours. After spending half of the night looking through Rose's incredibly messy nightstand, he'd come up with no further hints as to what might have happened to her. The only clue remained the strange entry in her diary regarding her conversation with Leo.

It was an uncomfortable night, not just because he had to look through his sister's personal belongings, but also because he continued to have that penetrating feeling as if David were watching him from the portrait about the fireplace. For the longest time after his brother's death, he'd been haunted by the same feelings. As if his brother peered down at him from every painting in his parents' manor in Derbyshire. He struggled with this for many years and wished for nothing more than permission to take down all the paintings showing his brother. Of course, their mother never would have allowed this. It wasn't until the family moved to London, that he could escape his brother's searing glare.

Nowhere in their London house was a painting of him, save for Rose's room. And Seth liked it like that. It was almost as if without the constant reminder of his brother he could finally move on.

Although I never really have moved on. Have I? Ever since David died, I haven't been able to make any close connection except with Leo. And even him I keep at a distance. Why else would it be that at my age I am still not married? And it is not for lack of eligible ladies wishing to enter into a courtship with me. But I could never allow myself to have such a close connection to anybody. And I would not want to be married without love. Thus, I am destined to be forever alone.

As he pondered this, the image of Winnifred, sitting beside him the previous night and holding his hand as he cried, came back into his mind.

If there was any woman he could ever open up to, it was her. He didn't know why but he had been drawn to Winnifred from the very start. And yet even with her, no, especially with her, he had to be on his guard. For if she came too close to him, he would risk being hurt again.

She had to be kept away. Yes, once Leo and Rose were safely back at home, he would have to draw away from Winnifred again, even though every fiber of his being wanted to do the exact opposite.

In the distance, the church bells from Saint James's church tolled loudly. Soon, Winnie would leave and travel alone to Clerkenwell. The idea of Winnifred visiting her uncle on her own concerned him. He didn't know Ezekiel Keating personally, but he heard enough stories from Leopold to know that his uncle was a fool and manipulator.

Ezekiel received a healthy inheritance upon the death of his brother, the late Baron, but gambled most of it away. His wife was not much better, spending all her inheritance on assorted bonnets, caps, shoes, and gowns. The two were always cleaned out, and Leo was perpetually nettled over their need for additional funds.

That said, aside from being silly and money-oriented, Keating did not sound like anyone who might be connected to the disappearance of his nephew. The opposite was true. Despite his unfortunate gambling habits, he was very fond of his nieces and nephew. Seth could tell that from Leo's stories as well.

Yet, they had no other leads. What if he was somehow involved? What if he had fallen in with the wrong crowd? Of course, that would not explain Rose's disappearance.

Seth drummed his fingers on the windowsill, exhaled, and dropped his shoulders.

He sat down in his armchair and crossed his legs, his foot bouncing up and down as he pondered his next moves.

I cannot possibly sit here until ten o'clock when I am to call on her. I will go out of my mind with worry. And what if something happens to her? I cannot allow someone else to be hurt. I know she will be upset, but perhaps that is just something I have to risk.

Determined, he jumped up out of his chair and darted out of his chamber into the hallway. Yes, he would accompany her, and if she got upset, then so be it. He would not risk anyone else getting hurt.



* * *

Winnifred exited her carriage outside her uncle's cottage in Clerkenwell. She always liked her uncle's little cottage, tucked away in between two clockmaker's shops.

"Shall I accompany you?" Mary asked. Winnie shook her head.

"No, Mary, I shall be quite well on my own. Take the carriage and wait at the end of the street. I will come for you soon."

"If you are sure..." Mary bit her bottom lip. "I am awfully worried. What between your brother and Lady Rose missing, and that strange note... Promise me you're not going to go off into St. Giles again. I was ever so worried. And then you did not come home until very late. I thought something awful happened to you."

"Mary, I am perfectly safe, I assure you. Besides, as you know, I wasn't in St. Giles by myself. His Grace will be at my side now should I have to go there again."

Mary sucked in a long gulp of air at the mention of her going to St. Giles.

"Pon, my honor, I don't know what to do if something happens to

you.”

Winnifred placed a hand on her friend’s shoulder. “Nothing will happen to me. Now be sure to pick up some marzipan. You know what my favorite is.”

She dismissed Mary, and the carriage drove off. Winnifred walked toward the front steps of her uncle’s home. She craned her neck to look at the upper windows and noticed movement behind one of the silk curtains. This was her aunt’s study, but Winnie had not expected her to be home. It was Thursday, and Thursday mornings, she always went on a promenade walk with Victoria.

She walked three steps towards the front door and was about to wrap her hands around the lion-head door knocker when the sound of footsteps came to her attention. She sighed deeply.

“Mary, I told you I would be... Seth?”

Seth stood before her, a sheepish smile on his face and his hands crossed behind his back. “What are you doing here? We were to meet at ten at my home.”

The irritation was rife in her voice, she realized too late, and her tone struck him as the smile dropped off his face.

“I know it. I apologize. I find myself exceedingly anxious about this venture of yours. I promise you, I will not interfere with what your plans are regarding your conversation with your uncle, but I could not sit idly at my home knowing that you are taking steps in our investigation that may place you in harm’s way.”

Winnifred shook her head, entirely exasperated.

“I appreciate your concern, but I would remind you that I ventured into St. Giles entirely on my own yesterday after you declined to join investigations. If I could do that on my own, don’t you think I am capable of interrogating my uncle in the comfort of his

townhouse in the suburbs of London?”

To her surprise, he smiled at her. “You, Winnifred, have a fire in you. Very well. Let me make this confession. In light of what I told you yesterday, I suppose there is no reason to keep it from you. I am concerned for your safety, for too many people I am close to have been hurt, and I would not want anything to happen to somebody else I care about.”

This struck her entirely speechless. Did he care about her? If the situation had been any different, this statement would have sent her to her chamber to ponder it for the entire afternoon, looking at it from every angle in an attempt to decipher just what he meant. He cared about her... However, as it stood, there was no time to waste on such matters. She would have to return to the statement once she found Leo.

“Faith, Seth, I thank you for worrying about me, but I assure you, if you were with me when I speak to my uncle, it would not do us any favors.”

He gave her a curt nod of the head and then pointed at his carriage. “Very well. I shall wait for you in my carriage. If you do not return within an hour, I shall come and knock. Is this an acceptable arrangement for you?”

She could not help but smile—his great concern for her touched her. And if nothing else, it was good to know she was not indefinitely trapped in her aunt and uncle’s home.

Her aunt was a notorious gabster, and if the shifting curtain upstairs was any indication, she was home. While Victoria did not mind spending time with their aunt and listening to everything currently *on-dit*; Winnifred despised it. She was not one to engage in fiddle-faddle, and knowing that Seth was outside and able to interrupt should she end up cornered by her aunt was some comfort.

“Very well, Seth. One hour.”

She watched as he returned to his carriage, and only when the door displaying his coat of arms closed behind him did she wrap her hand around the door knocker once more and announced herself.

Her stomach clenched as the door opened and her uncle's haggard face appeared in the door. It only took one glance to know that all was not well in Ezekiel Keating's world.

A sudden sense of dread enveloped Winnifred as she glanced over her shoulder at the carriage. Yes, Seth was right. It was safer to conduct this investigation entirely together from now on. She swallowed down the knot that had just formed in her throat and then stepped into the darkness of her uncle's home.

Chapter 11

“Winnie... I was not expecting you. What brings you here?”

Her uncle said it so hurriedly she was immediately suspicious. He looked at her, his eyelids fluttering while his eyes darted around the hall.

“I had something I wanted to talk to you about. But Uncle Ezekiel, are you unwell? You appear rather flustered.”

“Ha... No... Everything is... Have you heard from Leo?”

Winnie frowned at this. She had not told her uncle her brother was missing.

“What do you know about Leo being missing?”

Her uncle indicated for her to step into the drawing room to the right of the hallway. She sat on the chaise lounge, where she placed one of the red velvet cushions on her lap and pressed it against her chest.

“Winnie, I wish you had come to us right away. I know that he is missing. Vicky called on us a few days ago and told us. She was at sixes and sevens.”

Victoria... I should have known that she could not do as I asked her. I told her, please do not interfere. Allow Mr. Markham to do his work. I explicitly told her not to tell aunt and uncle about Leo's disappearance. But of course, she never listens to me. She never has and never will.

“Do not be cross with her. She was worried.”

Winnie glanced out of the window to where Seth's carriage waited

on the opposite side of the street. Something was comforting about seeing it there and knowing he was just seconds away.

“Well, I had come to call on you because of this matter. I know that he never came to speak to you when he was supposed to. But I wondered... Why did you ask him to call on you that day?”

Her uncle shifted in his seat and placed his hands underneath his buttocks, wiggling back and forth as though he were a child. He chewed on his bottom lip excessively and with such ferocity that Winnifred almost expected his lip to bleed.

“I had requested a loan. He declined, so I invited him to talk to me as I had a proposition for him... That was all.”

She wanted to groan, for, of course, it was about money. With her uncle, it almost always was.

“I see. And when he did not show, you were not concerned?”

He blinked and fixed his bright blue eyes on her face. “Winnifred, please do not think me a fool. I know very well what the family thinks of me. That I’m a gambler and a drunkard and a no-good waste of time. When your brother did not come to call on me, I assumed that he had decided he was done with me.”

Winnifred couldn’t help but pity him. It was true; she did not care for him because of his spindrift ways and generally reckless behavior. Yet he was not an evil person. He cared about her and Victoria, as well as Leopold. And outside of her siblings, he and his aunt were the only family she had left.

“Uncle Ezekiel, I assure you that is not the case. He fully intended to call on you—he told me.”

His lips curled into a gentle smile. “I suppose that is comforting to hear. Although it does not help us now.”

He pressed lips together, and for a moment, his eyes darted around the room. When he settled on her again, she could tell how much strain weighed upon him. There were dark circles under his eyes, and he sat with his shoulders slumped forward.

“Winnie, I am glad you have come to call, for I was going to send a messenger to you today to see if you would be available to meet with me. There is something we must discuss. Related to Leo.”

He got up and walked across the room toward a small oak desk and pulled open a drawer. Her heart dropped when she saw what he retrieved. It was a letter. Folded in half just like the one she had found in her brother’s chamber.

When he turned, he did not make his way back to her side right away. Instead, he stood with his back leaning against the chair, his eyes fixed on the floor.

“I will have you know, I have engaged the assistance of a private investigator. Mr. Murray. He came highly recommended by one of my neighbors.”

She could no longer remain in her seat. She stood and walked toward him as her legs shook beneath her.

“Uncle Ezekiel, what is it? What are you keeping from me? What is in that letter?”

“You need to know that I did not mean for any of this to happen. I was trying to... I just had to try and get out of trouble.”

Out of trouble? What in the world was he talking about? And what was in that letter? Why couldn’t he just hand it over?

“I do not know what you mean, Uncle.”

“I fear it is my fault. What happened to Leo. As you know, I enjoy a good gamble, and I placed a few wagers... Which is why I wanted

to borrow money from your brother. When he couldn't, I took out a bit of a loan from... certain gentlemen ... They were keen on getting it back, and well, I couldn't pay."

Winnifred narrowed her eyes. "And how, pray, were you planning on paying back the people you took a loan from?"

He shrugged as a sound of despair escaped his lips. "The only way I know how to make money. I went to the horse races. And I lost again."

Winnifred took in a significant lungful of air and closed her eyes. "So you made a considerable amount of debt through gambling, then borrowed money from questionable resources to pay back those gambling debts, and attempted to pay those loans back by making money gambling."

Simply thinking of it made her head hurt, for there was no logic to it. Then again, her uncle was not known to be a logical person. That was how he ran into trouble to begin with.

"That's about the long and the short of it, yes. I know how it sounds. Your aunt already gave me an earful about it. But there was nothing else I could do."

She bent her head back until she cast her eyes at the ceiling.

How can this man be related to my father? My father, who was sensible, careful, and prudent with his funds? How could he have come to have a brother like this who is so reckless and foolish?

When she stood up straight again, she glared at her uncle, who looked mortified. All the color drained out of his face, and he stood slumped over, a sad imitation of the hunchback of Notre Dame.

"How does this all involve my brother?"

"Well, the gentleman I borrowed money from... He still wants it

back....”

She swallowed hard, terrified of just what this meant. Uncle Ezekiel sighed deeply, and without another word, handed her the missive. As she took it, he did not release the sheet right away, instead, he held onto it and raised his eyes.

“I am sorry, Winnie, for any part I might’ve played in this.”

The anticipation made her sick, and she took several steps back until she landed on the chaise again. With trembling hands, she unfolded the letter, and when she saw the handwriting, she gasped. It was the same penmanship as the letter she had found in her brother’s chamber—the one summoning him to St. Giles.

Keating, we have your nephew... if you want to see him again deliver the sum of 10,000 pounds to us. Place the money in a sack and leave it on the Chinese Pavilion steps at Vauxhall Gardens this Saturday at two in the afternoon. Do not involve the authorities. If we so much as smell one of the Bow Street Runners, your nephew is dead.

Her hands flew to her mouth, and the letter sailed to the floor, where it came to a stop right beside the chaise lounge.

“Faith... No... Uncle. What are we going to do? Are they going to kill him? It is already Thursday. We only have two days. When did you receive this?”

“Day before yesterday. I was going to send it to you, but I was hoping to develop a plan to pay for it myself. But as you can imagine, I do not have 10,000 pounds. I scarcely have 100 pounds. Not that it’s any of your concern.”

Winnie looked out of the window at the carriage when a thought came to her.

How does this fit in with the disappearance of Rose? If her uncle received a ransom demand because he took a loan from the wrong

people, how did it result in Lady Rose also being kidnapped? She had nothing whatsoever to do with any of this. It did not make sense.

The sudden urge to leave overcame her. She had to speak to Seth. There was nothing more her uncle could tell her, nothing more she wanted to ask of him. Least of all did she want to be in his company. She got up, but before she did, she picked up the letter, folded it up, and slid it into her reticule.

“My letter...” He said with surprise.

She raised her eyes, aware that they were full of fury. “Uncle, I will take the letter. I will resolve this. What is the name of the person you took the loan from?”

He shrunk back at the fury in her voice.

“I do not know. They are people I deal with at times. I spoke to the usual man who assists me, and he arranged for the loan. I have no names. They are... Phantoms, you might say. Men without names. Well, without any real names. If you ask them, they’ll tell you their names are Jim or Will or some such... I am so ashamed, Winnie. So very ashamed. I know I should stop gambling; I know it. I intend to. I never meant to cause you harm.”

He stepped toward her in an ill-advised attempt to embrace her, but Winnie raised a hand to stop him.

“I must go. I will let you know what I find out, if anything. And when this is all said and done, I know Leo will want a word with you.”

“What are you going to do, Winnie?”

She had already reached the hallway and looked over her shoulder at her uncle, who looked even smaller.

“I do not know. But at least now I have a lead.”

“I would have paid the ransom if I could. But I can’t. Perhaps you can use some of the business money, if you have access to it. That might be the only way.”

Winnie said nothing further. She made her way down the hall and stepped out into the late morning air. The moment the door to her uncle’s house closed behind her, Seth jumped out of the carriage. Their eyes met across the busy road. She could not keep the despair from showing on her face.

As she made her way across the street toward him, she realized that they did not need words. He could tell from the look on her face that their worst fear was becoming a reality.

Chapter 12

Winnie stumbled out of the house and rushed across the street while Seth waited with bated breath. He opened the carriage door and was about to have her enter when she shook her head.

“I must... I have... We must travel together but I cannot risk being seeing without a chaperone. It is too risky and we cannot have another scandal. Please, wait for me. My carriage is just over yonder, I shall fetch Mary.”

She was entirely out of breath and Seth felt the fear and shock vibrating in her voice. He watched as Winnie rushed down the street and stopped at her own carriage. After a short conversation, she and Mary came back down the street, Mary climbed atop the box seat, and Bradford assisted Winnie into the carriage. Her reputation properly protected by the presence of a chaperone, he directed Bradford toward home.

Out of breath, she sat beside him—an unusual choice as the lady generally traveled facing traffic, not with her back to it.

“Have you read it? You must. It is... It changes everything.”

He swallowed hard, alarmed at the insistent tone. He unfolded the letter while Winnie gave him a full report of the exchange with her uncle. Then, as the carriage barreled down the street, Seth sat with the letter in his hand. It was the same handwriting as the previous letter.

He looked up, his mouth agape. “How can this be? Why would they have taken Rose because your uncle owes them money? Why would they not have only kidnapped Leo? Your uncle made a few bad bets and owed money to some shady characters, so they took his nephew, who is well known to be wealthy, to get back their money

through kidnapping. But Rose? Rose has no connection whatsoever to your uncle.”

“I know it. They are only connected through your business. But would gangs in St. Giles know that Leo had a business partner who also had a sister who just happened to have a secret that could be used to blackmail her over? I should think not.”

She looked out of the window, and Seth could not help but notice how beautiful she looked when she was deep in thought. She pressed her red lips together as her nose slightly twitched. It wasn't the first time that he noticed the slide upturn on the tip of her nose. He always found it uniquely charming.

“We must've missed something. Something that connects Rose to all of this. For there has to be something.” She sighed deeply. “I cannot believe it. Could this be due to my uncle and his reckless behavior? If it is, I do not know how we can ever make it up to you. Especially after what you told me yesterday. The torment you must be going through....”

Seth placed his hand on top of hers before he knew what he was doing and gently caressed it. Over the years, he had often wondered what her skin would feel like, what her mouth might taste like, but he had never allowed his thoughts to go very far. They were too dangerous, for the road they led down was full of potential pain, pain he would not be able to recover from. He cleared his throat and lowered his voice, hoping his tone was soothing, as he could tell she was very upset.

“Do not feel bad; it is not your fault. We all know your uncle is reckless. But *this* reckless? I am stumped.”

Winnifred said nothing. Her eyes lingered on his hand placed on top of hers, and he quickly withdrew it. The palm of his hand tingled where his hand had rested on her smooth skin.

He crossed his arms in front of his chest so that he would not be tempted to do such a thing again.

“Let us return to my house. I will ask the butler once more to see if there was any correspondence that might help us. If Rose was kidnapped by the same people who took Leo, which it stands to reason she was, there ought to be a ransom demand. The letter to your uncle does not mention her. Did he say anything at all about Rose?”

Winnifred shook her head and tucked one strand of hair behind her ear. “He did not. But I did not mention it to him, either. I felt it best that he didn’t know. He was so distraught already over the thought that his actions might have caused Leo to fall victim to such criminals, I cannot imagine what he would say or do if he knew that a young lady was also involved. He would be devastated.”

“It sounds as though you are correct. What do you propose we do?”

It is rather curious that I am asking her what she wishes to do. Not twenty-four hours ago, I was adamantly averse to her having anything to do at all with my investigation. And now here we are. She is the only one who has produced any results. I figured that she would be a distraction, and yet thus far, she has found all the clues. She has been nothing but a comfort to me. What a fool I was.

“Uncle Ezekiel asked that I use money from the business to pay the ransom. In all honesty, Seth, 10,000 pounds is ever so much money. I don’t even know that I would be able to raise it from our personal funds alone. I am a woman, I do not have any involvement in financial matters. Leo takes care of all of it.”

Seth swallowed hard and looked away, out of the window to where the outline of London was coming back in view. He did not venture outside of the city very often, and he hadn’t been to Clerkenwell in years. When he did travel, it was for business, never for pleasure. He found comfort in his routine.

“The business is worth much more than that. Besides, Leo has his personal fortune, as do I. Paying the ransom is not a problem one way or the other. However, I should like to know what happened to my sister before we make any choices.”

Winnie's beautiful pale face looked up at him, and the sun streamed into the inside of the carriage. For the first time, he noticed the sprinkle of freckles that stretched across her nose. They were so pale, almost invisible. Maybe that's why he never spotted them before. Perhaps it was simply that he hadn't been this close to her in a long time, if ever.

"We will search your sister's belongings again. We will find a connection. If nothing else, perhaps if we free Leo, he will be able to help us. I mean, should we find they are not together, against what it currently looks like."

"I can only hope," Seth sat quietly. "I wish Rose and I were closer. We used to be. Never as close as David and I, but we were... amiable."

Winnifred wetted her lips. "It changed after your brother died?"

He gave her a nod but did not look directly at her. It was difficult for him to talk about those days, and the days and weeks that followed.

"I was so wracked with guilt over what happened to my brother. If it weren't for me, he wouldn't have been out there in the storm, he wouldn't have been in the path of that horrible, horrible lightning strike that felled a centuries-old oak tree. If it weren't for me, he would be Duke. As he should have been. And I? I suppose I might be out at sea now."

The atmosphere in the carriage was quiet, save for the sound of her steady breathing. Neither spoke for a long time, but when Winnifred gently cleared her throat, he looked around at her. There was a sympathy in her eyes that was entirely devoid of pity. Something he had feared to see. Pity.

"You mustn't blame yourself. You couldn't have known. That is why these things are called accidents. Everything happens for a reason; we must accept that."

He scoffed, “You sound like a fortune teller, Winnie. I never took you for one interested in crystal gazing and cartomancy and such.”

“Jest if you must, Seth, but I sound like a reasonably-minded young lady. And I will not have you calling me anything else.”

He knew that the resentment in her voice was not genuinely felt, she was attempting to draw him out of his melancholy state. And for that, he was grateful.

“Very well, young lady. I appreciate your words of wisdom. I will acknowledge that I have heard them. But I do not believe them. Not now, not ever in the future.”

“You are a challenge....” She said through clenched teeth. Her exasperation made him smile.

“That, I’m afraid, is one of the character traits that has remained the same from before David’s death. I was always a challenge. Although I suppose my moods have gotten significantly worse since David passed. I have never been able to explain to anybody what it was to lose him.”

Winnifred’s gown crunched as she shifted in her seat so she could face him properly.

“I cannot imagine what it would be like to lose a twin. Leo and I... You know how close we are. But we are not twins. The thought of losing him—it’s devastating. These past two weeks have been so horrific for at the most inopportune moments I am overwhelmed by the idea that I will never see him again. That I will have to identify his remains one of these days. Or that I will never find out what happened to him. These thoughts—they haunt me, Seth, they haunt me.”

Her words tumbled one over the other as she spoke, and he realized she was on the verge of crying. He twisted his upper body so he fully faced her as well and did what he swore he’d never do again. He took her hand.

This time, he placed her small, thin hand between both of his and held on. As he squeezed, he looked her straight in the eyes.

“Listen to me, Winnifred. That will not happen. I promise you it will not come to pass. We will find him. And Rose. We already have a lead. We have hired the best investigator in all of London. We will gather the evidence we have, combined with anything we find at my house, and take everything back to Mr. Markham tomorrow. He will advise us what to do. If he says to pay the ransom, then we shall do that. Do not fret. I know it’s difficult, but thanks to your tenacity, you are not alone in this. And neither am I. We will recover them. Trust me.”

They looked at one another, lost in each other’s eyes. Seth lifted his right hand and gently cupped her face. The desire to kiss her overwhelmed him as he leaned forward. He needed to comfort her, and at the same time, required her comfort.

At the last possible moment, he sat upright, withdrawing from her, and dropped his hand.

“Trust me,” he muttered once more. Winnie blinked at him as if coming out of a trance and squeezed the one hand still holding on to hers.

“I do trust you. And I am so grateful that you are here on this journey with me. I was afraid you would be upset when I told you the truth about what my uncle told me.”

“Upset? Why?”

She shrugged and averted her eyes away from him and out the window. They were just arriving back in St. James.

“I thought that you would blame me, blame my family, for Rose’s disappearance.”

His thumb caressed the back of her hand, and suddenly, Seth was

utterly grateful that Winnie's maid, Mary, was not in the carriage with them. He would not have been able to touch Winnie in this way had she been there.

He pushed the thoughts aside and turned his attention to Winnie.

"No, I would never. You cannot control your uncle's actions any more than I could control..." His words trailed off as he came to realize her early words were true.

"Seth?" Her soft voice drifted to his ear, and he shook his head.

"Perhaps you were not wrong about what you said before. David made his own decisions, just like your uncle made his. Just like Leo and Rose made theirs. For something in their lives steered them to keep secrets from us. And it must be something so precious that they would risk going into St. Giles alone at night to keep it that way."

Winnifred's head nodded up and down, the loose strands of her hair gently swaying.

"You are right. We just have to find out what."

There was something in the way she could not meet his eye that made him wonder if she had a suspicion already. Alas, he did not have the chance to ask her as the carriage stopped outside Lester House. He let go of Winnie's hand, exited the carriage, and assisted her out.

"Mary," Winnifred said. "I have business to attend to here at Lester House. Would you care to wait here, or do you have to return home?"

The maid looked from Winnie to Seth and shrugged. "I shall walk home. It is but a short walk and I would like the air."

As the maid departed and the coachman climbed down from the

box seat, Seth and Winnie made their way up the stairs.

The door flew open when they were not even on the third step, and the butler stood there, an expression of concern written all across his old face. The wrinkles around his eyes burrowed deeper than they normally would, and his thin lips almost disappeared as he pressed them together.

“Your Grace, you have returned. What a blessing. For there is a grave matter to address.” He paused and stepped aside to allow them entry into the townhouse. The moment the door closed behind them, the butler swallowed, his eyes wide.

“Your Grace, I am afraid a member of the household has been keeping secrets from you....”

Seth’s and Winnifred’s eyes met across the floor as they both realized the journey toward recovering their siblings was about to take another surprising turn.

Chapter 13

Winnifred stared at Seth, whose eyes narrowed as he took in the butler before them.

“Whatever do you mean, Rogers? Who has been keeping secrets from me?”

The butler glanced at the coachman, who’d handed control of the carriage to a stable hand and hastened inside after them upon hearing the butler’s words.

“Bradford? What is the meaning of this?”

The two servants exchanged a concerned look before the coachman cleared his throat.

“After our conversation, Your Grace, I addressed the entirety of the servant hall and implored them that if anyone should know anything, we must inform you at once. The servants felt rather upset at their failure to alert you at once when Lady Rose went missing.” He shrugged and then gave a deep sigh.

“Never mind all that,” Seth said with some irritation in his voice. “Am I to understand that one of the servants had a change of heart thanks to your speech?”

“Mr. Bradford was quite inspirational,” the butler said. “Lady Rose’s lady’s maid, Mrs. McKee, has come forward with some information.”

He glanced in the drawing room where a middle-aged maid stood by the fireplace. She wore a black gown with a white apron tied over the front. Upon her head rested a small cap, and she looked every bit like any lady’s maid would. Refined, elegant, and entirely

regal. The only unusual thing about her, and what stuck out to Winnifred immediately, was the expression on her face.

Her eyes were sunken deep into their sockets, and the black circles under them were even darker than those around Uncle Ezekiel's. Her entire body shuddered as they approached, and when she looked up at Seth, there was fear in her eyes.

Winnifred didn't understand why the maid was in such a state. What terrible secret had she been keeping that she would be so upset at being found out? Seth stepped up to her and tilted his head to one side, and when he spoke, it was in an affable tone.

"Mrs. McKee?" The kind, soothing tinge in his voice seemed to put the maid at ease as she looked up and gave a tiny nod. "There is something you wanted to tell me?"

"Yes, Your Grace. And I must beg your forgiveness for not coming forth sooner. You must understand, I've been with Lady Rose ever since you arrived here in London and...."

Seth raised a hand to stop her flow of words. "I know it. My sister is very fond of you. I know you to be a loyal servant. Under normal circumstances, I would commend you for keeping my sister's confidence, as you should. However, in this case, any little bit of information could lead to her safe return."

The woman pressed her lips together as if, even now, she was not sure if she should betray the lady for whom she cared.

"I know it, Your Grace. I know it. And Mr. Bradford made me realize it, too. However, it feels like such a betrayal. Alas, it must be done."

She shook her head and then turned. Winnie's eyes followed her movement, and she saw her pick up a small wooden box, carefully adorned with hand-painted pansies. The maid picked up the box and handed it to Seth, who squinted at it.

"Lady Rose entrusted this box to my care. It contains letters from a certain young gentleman." She glanced at Winnifred, whose heart dropped to her knees. She remembered her earlier suspicion, the one so swiftly dismissed about Rose and Leo's involvement. Had her suspicion been right after all? Was there something between them? She chastised herself for not having brought up her concern to Seth when it first occurred to her.

"A certain gentleman?" Seth asked.

"Your Grace, perhaps we ought to look through the letters in the privacy of your study. They might provide us with vital clues," Winnifred suggested, using his title since they were in company. "I have a suspicion from whom they might be."

Seth's mouth formed into the shape of an O as he studied her face, but he said nothing. Instead, he gave her a quick nod and then stepped forward in the direction of his study. Winnifred hastened behind him, and when the door closed, he dropped the box on his desk and opened it. The box squeaked, indicating its age. The smell of damp paper filled the air as they peeked inside.

Seth pressed his lips together. The tension in his shoulders was easy to see as he stared down at the box of letters.

Winnifred glanced past Seth into the box, and if she hadn't already figured who the sender might be, her heart might have skipped a beat. However, since she had already suspected that her brother was the author, it did not surprise her to see his penmanship on the front of each letter.

The name Rose was written in cursive handwriting that was unmistakably Leo's.

Winnifred knew right away that Seth was uncomfortable going through these and stepped forth.

"This is Leo's handwriting. Since he is my brother, perhaps I should be the one to look through them."

Seth shook his head. "I think we both know what this means. I had no idea. No idea at all. See how little I know my sister?"

"I understand you so well. If this were Victoria, I would be just as shocked. It can't be helped. For now, we must set aside sentimental thoughts and look through these letters so we might find a clue as to what happened."

She reached for the box and took out a handful of letters. "Do you think these are in order?"

At this, Seth chuckled. "Going through my sister's things in her chamber has not given you a clue as to her gift of organization? No, I venture to say these are in no order whatsoever. And you are right. We must set aside sentimental thoughts and feelings and do what we have to in order bring them home."

He reached into the box and took the remaining letters. With his chin, he nodded to the chaise in the corner and the table before it.

"Come, let us sit there and look through them. Maybe if there is some date or something, we can put them in order."

"If these are all from Leo, I can assure you there will be a date. He's meticulous about those sorts of things."

"Of course he is. It comes from the type of business we run. It's important to keep records. Perhaps Leo's orderly nature will assist us in finding him."

They sat side by side, much closer than Winnifred had ever sat by any man. Their legs almost touched, and if the situation had been any different, she might've found herself concerned about her reputation. For sitting this close to a gentleman was uncouth. However, she discovered that she did not care. His physical closeness provided her with a strange sense of comfort and security.

They each read through the letters, and by the second one,

Winnifred's suspicions had been confirmed. These were love letters from Leo to Rose.

"I suppose this was what they were being blackmailed over?" She said after a while.

Seth did not reply. His eyes moved gently from side to side as he took in every last word of the letter presently in his hand. He was grinding his teeth, it was evident by the way his jaw moved.

When he was finished with the letter, he put it on his lap and looked at her.

"It was my fault that they were being blackmailed."

"Your fault? How could it have been your fault? You didn't even know."

He handed her his letter. "Read this."

Winnifred took the letter from his hand and inadvertently touched his fingers. The sudden connection sent a jolt up her arm and into the very core of her being. Every time they touched, even if it was as gently as this, she couldn't help but allow the little flame within her heart to flicker a little more vibrantly. She thought back to the carriage ride, her hand so gently between his, his lips so close to her she was sure he'd kiss her.

Oh, how she'd wanted him to kiss her—

She shook her head, chasing the thought away. And focused on the letter instead.

My dear Rose,

I am sorry if our conversation yesterday upset you. I understand that you wish to tell your brother the truth. So do I. However, I cannot help but worry that it might destroy so many relationships. I regard him as

my dearest friend, but I cannot allow myself to forget that he is also a Peer of the Realm—several rungs above me in the hierarchy. And while I am by no means poor, I do not have the title nor the wealth to justify my making an offer. I am afraid that despite our friendship, your brother will not agree to a courtship between us. I fear that if we tell him the truth, our friendship will suffer and our business relationship too. As for you and I... As long as we keep our relationship a secret, we can enjoy it. But if we tell him, if he is opposed to it, it will be all over. And then what are we to do? I love and respect you too much to take you to Gretna Green. I do not know what the answer is. If there even is one. I am not opposed to telling him with time, but not now. I require more time to think, my dearest.

“There it is. Do you see? They were so convinced that I would disapprove of the union simply because your brother is a Baron. How could he think this of me?”

I genuinely do not know what I am to say to this, for I cannot disagree with Leo. I, too, would've been hesitant about confiding in him. After all, one of the reasons I always thought Seth and I could never be was that he would never look at me as a potential match. I am the sister of a Baron, nothing more. Does he not understand what being a Duke means?

She looked at him for a long while and licked her lips, pondering how to answer his question. However, as it turned out, she did not need to. Seth nodded his head and averted his eyes away from her and out the window.

Outside, rain clouds hung heavy in the gray sky; the weather entirely matched their mood.

“I see. You agree with what he has written. You, too, think I am so prideful and haughty that I would disapprove of a union simply because of the difference in standing between the partners.”

“Given that you are a member of the House of Lords, you know very well how different Barons are treated from a Marquess or Dukes. My father was looked down upon because of his lowly title.

Do you know that in the eyes of many of the nobility, Barons and Viscounts are little above commoners?”

“But I have never given this impression to either of them, not intentionally. I assumed my sister wished to marry a Duke or a Marquess, but I didn’t insist upon it. I care little if one is above or below me in rank. I want my sister to find happiness. I want my good friend to be happy.”

Winnie did not know what to say to this.

“I... I suppose we all assumed that it was your idea of what a union should be, one of equal value. I must say that I thought you would never consider... I mean that is to say... That you always...”

Her words trailed off, for she could not put into a sentence what her heart wanted to say. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, settling herself. When she spoke again, she raised her eyes and looked squarely in his face.

“I always thought that the reason you have not married yet is that you wanted somebody of high birth, a fellow Duke’s daughter. I thought you would consider any other beneath your touch.”

“Beneath my touch? No, never. It hurts me that you would think of me as such. I have not married because the idea of love terrifies me. After losing my brother, the idea of attaching myself to anybody to such a degree is... It’s unfathomable. And it’s not that I have never loved, it’s that I cannot allow myself to confess....”

He jumped up and left her side. With his hands clasped behind his back, he strutted across the room.

“I am sorry, Seth. I suppose it was because I did not know about your brother, thus, I didn’t consider any other possibilities. And since Leo doesn’t know the details about your brother’s death, either, I am sure he thinks the same as I. And Rose...”

Seth spun around. "Rose does not know me any better than I know her. It would stand to reason she would think me unwilling to allow her to marry a Baron." He groaned and clapped his hands in front of his face. "Heaven forefend, I attempted to make a match for her with a local Marquess whom she promptly rejected. If she already thought that I did not want her to marry someone lower-ranking in the peerage, then that would've only convinced her further. And if she told Leo...."

Winnifred leaned her back into the soft cushion behind her. "Of course. And that conversation happened just before the blackmailing letter arrived. I am sure both of them must've assumed that the blackmailers referred to their secret relationship. But how does my uncle figure into all of this?"

"I do not think he does. My assumption is the gang your uncle borrowed money from did a fair amount of research into your uncle upon learning that his nephew was involved in a successful business venture. I would assume that they trailed Leo and uncovered his secret relationship with Rose. They then attempted to combine their efforts by asking for money from them both. Then, they decided to kidnap them for extra funds."

A dull headache took hold of Winnifred's temples, and she pushed against them, running her fingers in circles to help ease the pain.

"But the blackmail letters didn't ask for amounts. Would they not have first asked them to bring a certain amount of money and then kidnap them?"

Seth smirked.

"You were with me in St. Giles, you overheard the conversation between the two men. Did they strike you as men who thought ahead? If their leader is anything like them, it stands to reason that the kidnapping might've been a last-minute decision. No, I think they asked both Rose and Leo to the meeting point so that they would each find themselves confronted with the other. Just proving that the blackmailers indeed knew all about their illicit relationship.

I assume that then they asked for money, and likely either one or the other refused. Leading to the kidnapping.”

“I suppose...” she leaned forward, a sudden faintness overtaking her. She was not one to think much of young ladies who utilized the ‘fainting couch’ to elicit attention from their paramour. In fact, she’d be mortified if she fainted in front of Seth.

Seth rushed to her side and sat down. “Are you in pain? You look pale.”

“Just a headache. That is all.”

He gently placed a hand on her forehead, and the sensation made her skin tingle. She smiled weakly at him.

“Seth, it’s just a trifling headache. You need not worry.”

He gave her a nod and removed his hand, placing it in his lap.

“Have you taken any food this day?” he asked. Winnifred thought about it and shook her head.

“I have not. There hasn’t been time.”

He nodded and rushed across the room to ring the bell, summoning a servant.

“That is why you are unwell. You must eat, Winnifred. I will have the cook bring a meal for you, or eat downstairs in the dining room. Yes, you ought to eat downstairs and enjoy a little peace, away from all of this. I shall continue to read through these letters and sort them while you take a meal.”

His tone was such that she didn’t dare protest. Besides, he was correct. She needed to eat, lest she lose all of her strength. And today, Winnie suspected, would be a very long day indeed.

She blinked at him. The concern, the care, and the way she'd found him looking at her whenever he thought she didn't see awoke in her a suspicion of a different kind.

In light of everything she'd learned about him, and considering their closeness, could it be... Was there a possibility that he, too, felt the fire between them?

Could it be that under the cool exterior, there was a heart that yearned for her as much as hers did for him?

Chapter 14

Seth organized the letters by date. Just as Winnie had said, all of Leo's letters were dated, making his task at least somewhat easier. However, reading the truth about his good friend and his sister's developing romance through this specter of time caused him some discomfort. Not just because the intimacy of Leo's words was highly uncomfortable to read, but also because he was devastated that his sister kept her happiness from him—and endangered herself in the process.

Could I have prevented this? If I had not been so closed off, perhaps Rose would've felt more comfortable trusting me, and she wouldn't have needed to hide. A gang would've had no reason to blackmail her. Alas, I know it does no good for me to have such thoughts. What's done is done. All I can do now is find her.

He looked up when the floorboards creaked in the hall and saw Winnifred standing in the doorway.

She looked rested and beautiful, which cheered his heart. If it weren't for her presence, her guidance, and determination, he didn't know where they would stand now. His lips turned up into a slight smile which she returned with an even brighter one.

"You look much better."

"I feel much better. I must say your cook makes the most delicious plum cake. And the pineapple was divine. But what about you? What have you found out?"

He waved his hand over the array of letters.

"I have read every one of these. And I have concluded that our siblings started a relationship with one another at least six months

ago. Leo's first letter speaks of a conversation they had at the theater. It seems they made a habit of meeting at the Royal Menagerie or the park. Mrs. McKee always accompanied Rose. They were careful and arranged the meetings so they were always quite by chance, not by design."

"They certainly made an excellent effort of it, as I suspected nothing. Nothing at all. I can't understand why Leo did not take me into his confidence. I was always fond of Lady Rose, and my brother knows that."

Seth, who had been squatting on the floor, stood up, and his knees gave a loud creaking sound. He stretched his legs and rolled his shoulders to relieve some of the tension.

"It seems that Leo was in a difficult position. He describes it as being at point non plus in several letters. Stating that he did not know what to do and what the future would bring. He did not wish to speak to me regarding the matter, but he also did not wish to end the connection."

Winnifred paced the length of the room and came to a stop near his desk. She drummed the fingers of her right hand on his oak desk and chewed her bottom lip before spinning around.

"I wonder if Rose spoke to anybody about this. All we have are my brother's words. As eloquent as I am sure they are, they give us only half of the story. We must find out what her feelings were. And from her hand or mouth, not by way of my brother. For he always had a way of interpreting things his own way."

Seth rubbed his chin. A fine layer of stubble appeared on his face as he hadn't had a chance to let his valet shave him for several days. He was not in the habit of allowing himself to grow a beard or look disheveled. He was too aware of his station in life. Alas, these last few days had simply gotten away from him.

"It seems my sister was determined to make the union official, and if not for fear of my reaction, already would have."

Winnifred blinked at him. "Do you suppose perhaps they might have run away together?"

Seth shrugged. "It occurred to me. It certainly had. But there is no indication in the letters that this was their intention. Plus, there is also the letter demanding money. And the blackmail notice. That alone negates any possibility of them running away together."

Winnifred's legs set into motion again, and she made another circle around the study. Seth couldn't help but smile; he had already picked up on some of her more unusual mannerisms. And it seemed that walking greatly aided her ability to form complex thoughts.

And without fail, almost with an instant, she snapped her fingers. "I wonder if they had a secret plan to run away together and the blackmailers found out while gathering information about Leo? And further, I wonder if anyone else did know about it? Mrs. McKee did. Is there nobody else your sister would have confided in? A friend? Or a family member?"

At the words, family member, Seth could not help but jerk back. And not because of David. He blinked and looked across the room to Winnifred, whose mouth dropped open.

"There is somebody, isn't there? I can see it in the way that your lips are twitching."

I am not accustomed to anybody reading me like an open book the way she does. It is vexing, and at the same time, oddly pleasant. I often feel as though I am trapped within myself, without anybody who can understand me. Perhaps if the situation were not as grave as it is, I would find her ability to suss me out so readily quite charming.

"There is a cousin," he confessed. "But I do not wish to consult him. We are not close."

"But what about your sister? Is she closely connected with said cousin?"

Seth couldn't help himself, he groaned at the question.

"They used to be quite close. Cedric is the illegitimate son of my father's younger brother. My uncle passed away when Cedric was young, and my father took it upon himself to look after him. He is an insufferable fellow. It is almost as if he carries his circumstance of birth as a badge of honor. I think because Rose and I have not been as close as we once were, she has taken to Cedric. However, as I understand it, as of late their relationship has become fractured."

"Both our families are marred with these broken connections. How much easier it would be if we would all get along. How much simpler and more harmonious."

Seth couldn't help but grin. "I did not know you were such a dreamer, Winnifred."

"I have the desire to have harmony in my life. I don't see anything wrong with that. Alas, I suppose some things can never be. Although I will say that you have a much bigger chance of repairing your relationship with Rose than I do with Victoria. I already dread seeing her when I return home, as I know she will be ever so upset at my not telling her more about Leo. Hearing that she went to see my uncle was rather surprising—and unsettling. But anyhow your cousin, Cedric, is he here in London?"

Seth gave her a curt nod and crossed his arms in front of his chest.

"I wish he were not, but yes. He is in Mayfair."

"Mayfair? Your cousin lives here in Mayfair? But it is just a short carriage ride away. Your sister could easily have called on him with some frequency without you knowing of it. Let us call on him." The enthusiasm in her voice made him recoil.

"I do not wish to call on Cedric. Winnie, as much as I want to find my sister, there are some things I do not wish to do. As I said, relations have been rather fraught with him, and I do not think he could be of any help."

“What could be so terrible as to prevent your seeking his counsel?”

“Cedric and I were never close, as I said. My father took to him, for whatever reasons, but I didn’t. We are not alike at all. The only time he calls on me is when he needs something—a recommendation, funds, an introduction. The last time he asked me to help him get a voucher for Almack’s from one of the Lady Patronesses. I declined. He’s since attempted further contact regarding one matter or another, but I declined to speak to him.”

Winnifred pressed her lips together and crossed her arms under her chest. He couldn’t help but notice how her chest rose and fell as she breathed harder with obvious exasperation. Her long smooth neck twisted as she shook her head and a black curl caressed her collarbone.

“But you do not know if your sister was in contact with him. She might have been and therefore, we must speak to him. If you will not see him, then please send a messenger to him to let him know I will come and do so.”

“Winnifred,” he said, unable to keep the irritation out of his voice. “Must you challenge me so? Is not my word enough?”

She drew her eyebrows together and shook her head. “No, Seth, in this matter, your word is not enough. Not when my brother’s life is at stake. I will not have this petulance, this silly, troublesome relationship between you and your cousin interfere with recovering Leo and Rose. What if your cousin has a vital clue that we need? And we do not get it because you are stubborn?”

Seth’s mouth dropped open. “I thought earlier that nobody but Rose spoke to me as directly as you do. But I must amend my thoughts. For not even Rose dares speak to me in such a way.”

He noticed her swallowing hard, but even this, his stern rebuke, did nothing to change her mind—it was evident by the way she continued to stare at him in defiance. She would speak to Cedric one way or another.

He knew that if he did not write her a letter of introduction and send a messenger ahead, she might take it upon herself to call on him and risk ruining her reputation. No matter her social standing, no woman could call on a man she was not previously introduced to. And even then, only on matters of business. Seth could allow her to do as she wished and risk her good character, but he cared too much about her to allow this. As much as he didn't want to involve Cedric, to keep Winnifred from ruining herself, he would have to do what she requested.

He shook his head.

I cannot refuse her. I have already grown so fond of her that I cannot deny her anything. And this feeling inside of me, this great need to protect her grows larger and larger by the moment. I don't even know if I will be able to separate myself from her after our investigation concludes. This magnetic pull is unlike anything I have ever felt. A part of me still wishes I had kissed her earlier, but instead, I pulled away as I always do.

He dropped his shoulders. "Very well, Winnifred. You shall have what you wish. I will write a letter to Cedric and tell him an associate of mine is coming to speak to him. I'll make a second copy for you to keep on your person. Then you can take one of my carriages and call on him. The letter will give you protection as you will be acting as my agent. But please, be sure to take a chaperone with you. I cannot have you ruined. I will not."

He pulled a piece of paper out of his desk and quickly wrote to his cousin, asking him to expect Winnifred that morning. As he handed the second notice to Winnifred, their fingers touched and again a jolt raced through him. This time he did not remove his hand but instead gently curled his fingers around hers.

"Winnie, please be careful. I wish I could convince you that no good can come out of speaking to my cousin, but I see you have made up your mind and there is nothing I can do."

"I cannot explain it, but it is a feeling deep within me that tells me

we must follow this clue. In any case, we must decide what to do about the ransom demand.”

“We must. After you return from my cousin’s, no matter what you find, we will go to see Mr. Markham and present him with what we have found. Perhaps he has made some discoveries as well. We will converse with him and follow his advice. In the meantime, we cannot let anybody know what we have found out so far.”

“Of course not. It shall remain between the two of us. Only you and I shall know the full extent of our discoveries. I will go home because I am in need of a change of clothing. Then I shall call on your cousin and return here directly.”

Despite her declaration, she did not move, instead, she stood where she was, her eyes resting on Seth’s face.

“Winnie...” he spoke quietly, his voice thick with suppressed emotion. Her beautiful eyes sparkled, and her lips, red and full, parted slightly.

“Seth, I... I...”

He shook his head and stepped toward her. He placed one hand on the back of her head, and before he lost his courage and hid behind the safety of his self-imposed walls, placed a kiss on her forehead. His lips lingered on her skin for only an instant before he let go and moved away.

“Take good care of yourself and return quickly,” he spun around, stalked across the room and turned his back to her so she would not see the elation—and confusion—written all across his face. Her footsteps retreated, and after a while, he knew he was alone. Seth watched as Winnifred left through the large French doors and stepped out into the road.

She stood, waited for the carriage, and then, just before entering, turned.

Their eyes met, and suddenly, Seth knew one thing more clearly than anything else. The feelings so long repressed had burst to the surface, and there was no way he could deny it anymore. He loved her. He always had and always would.

Chapter 15

Victoria rummaged through her sister's dressing room and grew more and more nettled by the moment. She stood with her hands pressed against her hips and glanced around the room.

Winnifred was an exceedingly tidy young woman, something she never failed to rub right into Victoria's nose. Vicky knew that she was a rather messy person, but her sister's devotion to tidiness bordered on the obsessive.

"And yet," she said under her breath, "I still cannot find what I have come here for. Where is it?"

She pulled open the armoire and pushed aside one beautiful gown after another, as her eyes narrowed.

"What a piffle."

She rushed out of the dressing room and was about to cut across Winnifred's room and into the hall when she stopped in her tracks.

"Mary?"

The maid glared at her, suspicion written all over her plum-red face.

If I ever end up having a face as puffy as hers or as red as hers, I shall die of mortification.

"Miss Victoria, I did not expect you here, in your sister's chamber. Are you lost?"

Sarcasm dripped from every word. Victoria knew that Mary and her sister were close. Closer really than Victoria and Winnifred, a

circumstance that sometimes made her a little sad. But it was one of the things that could not be helped. She and Winnifred were so different they would never be friends.

Of her siblings, Leo was the one Victoria was close to. His absence was deeply felt by them both, although Winnifred made much more of a spectacle of her feelings than Victoria.

In truth, Victoria was entirely out of her mind due to her brother's disappearance. She even traveled to Clerkenwell to meet her Uncle Ezekiel—and she never ventured to that part of town. To be seen anywhere but in the city, especially in the suburbs, could be damaging to a young lady's reputation. At the very least, one would surely end up with an *on-dit*. And besides, Clerkenwell was so awfully dull.

She still could not believe Winnifred hadn't even told their aunt and uncle about Leo's disappearance. But then again, both of her siblings had a great dislike for Uncle Ezekiel and Aunt Anna. Victoria did not quite understand why—she was always very close to them, and they both cared about all three of them. Especially since the death of their parents, Victoria spent a lot of time with them.

“So? Are you?”

Mary's voice drew her out of her thoughts, and she blinked at the maid.

“Am I what?” She crossed her arms in front of her chest and tilted her head to one side.

“Lost. Are you lost here in your sister's chamber?”

Vicky sneered. If it was up to her, Mary would long since have been let go. She never liked her, not even when Mama and Papa were alive. For a maid, Mary was highly impertinent and not at all amiable in nature, as though she were somehow better than everybody else. Even though Vicky had it on good authority that

Mary didn't even know how to read and write, unlike Vicky's maid, Hester, who was not only literate but even spoke French.

"I am not lost. I am searching for my shawl. My sister took it, pray, have you seen it?"

"Is it the pink one? The pink silk one with the silver embroidery?"

Vicky nodded her head. "Yes, that's the one. It's meant to be worn with this gown."

She motioned down towards the gown currently on her person. It was a beautiful light pink round gown with a silver sash tied underneath her bust. Small red roses decorated the grey lace hem of the gown and the edges of the puff sleeves. The shawl brought out her pretty blue eyes.

"It surely is," Mary said and blinked at her. "I also believe both belong to your sister."

"They most certainly do not. Just because my sister is in the habit of taking things that aren't hers and wearing them as if they are, doesn't mean that they belong to her. The gown is mine, as is the shawl. So, where is it?"

"Over yonder." Mary said and pointed toward the small dresser in the corner underneath the French windows.

Vicky spun on her heels and rushed towards the indicated furniture and at once threw open the top drawer.

"Not that one, Miss Victoria."

Mary's voice still echoed through the room when Victoria spotted something in the drawer that was much more intriguing than her shawl. It was a piece of paper in scrawny handwriting she had never seen before. She read the words, and immediately, her blood ran cold. She grabbed it, but her hands shook so violently, she had

to force herself to close her fingers around the paper and lift it.

“What are you doing? That belongs to your sister.”

Victoria turned her head and stared at the maid. “Do you know what this is? Have you any idea? I know you maids are not well educated, but even you must understand... I am sure Winnie has told you...”

She looked at the note in her hand. It was a ransom demand. Addressed to her brother, it demanded his presence at a specific address in St. Giles; just seeing the words St. Giles written made her shudder. That part of town was home to one of the worst of the rookeries. Full of gamblers, thieves, and courtesans, it was a place someone of her brother’s standing would never venture voluntarily.

“It belongs to Miss Keating,” the maid insisted. There was no denying it, her tone made it clear—Mary knew exactly what this note meant.

Of course she knows. Winnifred tells that woman everything, I cannot believe she would tell the maid and not me when it is my brother who is missing.

Her nostrils flared as she attempted to control her anger.

“Where did my sister get this? I know you recognized it, I can see it written all over your face. Where did my sister find this?”

The maid took a step back from her. “You ought to ask your sister, Miss Victoria.”

“I would if she ever came home. I haven’t seen her in days. It is as if I am an only child for all the time I spend alone. Now, you know something. Tell me.”

“I do not answer to you, Miss Victoria.”

This enraged Vicky more than she could ever put into words. She stamped one foot and balled her hands into fists, crumpling the note as she did.

“You are maid to the Keating family. You answer to me just as much as to my brother and my sister. You will tell me what this note means. He is my brother, too. Just because you and my sister are close doesn’t mean you have any right to cast me aside when it comes to his disappearance. Do you think just because he and I are not as close as he and Winnie, I do not care? I am at sixes and sevens, and this is my first clue. You will tell me what you know.”

Her voice rose with every single word until it became so shrill she thought that it might just burst out the windows.

Mary shrunk before her and took another step back until she banged with her back into the wall. Victoria hadn’t meant to scare her, but she was genuinely overcome with a wave of anxiety and fear.

“Your sister found it in your brother’s chamber. She searched it yesterday. She’s been with His Grace, the Duke of Cambarton, who is assisting her.”

“Seth is helping her? I thought he was in Devon. I called on him a few days ago.”

“He has returned. His sister, Lady Rose, is also missing.”

Vicky could not contain her horror at this news. She slumped against the windowsill as the color and strength drained out of her. Mary was by her side in a moment and pulled a chair from the writing desk and assisted her in sitting down.

“They’ve been taken... They must have been. Don’t you think so, Mary?”

“It certainly looks that way, Miss Victoria. But do not fear. Your

sister has already engaged the help of a private investigator. A Mr. Markham in Camden. Very well-known fellow. I'm sure he will find both Lord Drayton as well as Lady Rose in no time at all."

"That is not good enough," Victoria replied, "not good enough at all. And for Winnifred to keep this from me... It is an outrage. A maid knows more than a family member. Where is my sister now? At Lester House?"

"As far as I know. She called on your uncle earlier this morning. I accompanied her as a chaperone. But after she spoke to your uncle, she and His Grace reconvened at Lester House, and I departed."

"She spoke to my uncle? I wonder what else she's keeping from me." Victoria got up. Her legs still swayed beneath her, but she stood with a power of sheer determination.

"Have the carriage ready. I am going to Lester House myself. I will find out what else has been kept from me. Please walk Pugsley. I don't want him to have another accident in the drawing room."

"Nobody does..." Mary said under her breath. Victoria fired an icy glare in her direction but let the impertinence go.

She didn't need Mary's information anymore; she would get her own. Victoria stomped down the stairs, a burning rage in her eyes when suddenly, she spotted movement outside the door. The stained glass windows on either side allowed for a hint of an outline of whomever came to call.

Victoria stopped in her tracks and watched and for one glorious moment, she was sure who the person outside of the door was—

Leo.

She dashed forward and gripped the door handle, ripping the door open but when she came face to face with the person standing there, her smile faded.

It was not Leo. Of course not. Victoria's heart shattered at the disappointment and once again she chastised herself for having made such a cake of herself.

Hope, she'd come to learn, was futile.

Chapter 16

Winnifred stopped outside her home, one hand on the wrought iron railing. She took a deep breath as her hand traveled to her head, and her fingers rested on the spot where Seth kissed her.

The warm feeling of comfort ran through her again as she thought of it.

When his lips rested on her skin, it chased away the worries and the anxiety of the last few days—at least for an instant. It was almost as if, when he was near her, they were enveloped in a veil of peace, shutting out all of the darkness around them. Seth had become her sanctuary.

When they parted, and he turned away from her, she considered the possibility that he'd regretted the kiss, innocent as it was. However, when she turned on the stairs and saw him standing above, smiling down at her, she knew he didn't. Something between them shifted, and nothing would be as it once was. She took a breath and climbed the steps. There was no time to consider her and Seth's connection. She had to change into a different gown and call on his cousin.

Alas, the second the heavy door opened, she was set upon by her sister.

“Winnifred! There you are. At last, you show your face.”

Her sister thundered with so loud a voice a woman stopped on the pavement and observed the interaction. Winnie's face grew hot with embarrassment at this, and she pushed past her sister into the coolness of the house.

“Victoria. Mind your voice. Must you draw all this attention?”

Her nerves were so frazzled it didn't take much provocation to set up her bristles, and her sister's tone alone was enough.

"This is your concern? My drawing attention? How dare you? How dare you keep me in the dark like this?"

Winnifred blinked at her sister, who stood before her a picture of rage. In her hand, she waved a piece of paper. At first glance, she didn't recognize it but then—

"Oh, Vicky..."

"Do not even attempt to soothe me by using my pet name. I know that tone. I asked why you did not tell me?"

The sound of Pugsley's incessant barking prevented Winnifred from replying. Her sister picked up the pug, who was growing more and more rotund by the day, and rocked him in her arms as though he were a baby.

"I did not want to worry you," Winnie said when at last, her sister quieted the dog.

"Horsefeathers! You did not want to involve me. I know that you do not care for me, but Leo is my brother, too. Have I no right to know what happened to him? Do my worry and fear mean less than yours? What does this note mean? Who is blackmailing Leo? Did this person, the author of this note, cause his disappearance?"

Winnifred exhaled slowly through her nose and gathered her thoughts. Her sister already knew Leo was being blackmailed. She already alerted their aunt and uncle to the disappearance. Could she be trusted with more information? Winnie would have to decide what to do next.

If I tell her everything I found out, she might grow even more enraged. But if I keep it from her and she finds out some other way, just like she found the note, our relationship will shatter forever.

Winnie thought of the promise she made Seth. They were not to tell anybody else about their investigation. She did not want to betray him, but at the same time, even though she and Victoria were not close, she was right. Leo was her brother, too.

With a deep sigh, Winnifred stepped toward her sister and indicated the drawing room.

“Calm yourself, I will tell you what I know. But I do not want anyone to hear, and you must swear you will not tell a soul nor do anything rash.”

Victoria squinted at her and shook her head. “I will make no such promises until I know what is going on here.” She stepped into the drawing room and set the dog down on the chaise lounge where at once he laid down on one of the expensive velvet cushions, lifted up his legs, and licked his pronounced belly.

From the corner of her eye, she spotted her black and white cat, Bell, shooting out from underneath the chaise, making an effort to escape the dog.

“Victoria, it is of the utmost importance that you do not interfere. His Grace, the Duke of Cambarton, and I have been investigating Leo’s disappearance together, and we have some leads. We have engaged a private investigator, and we will find Leo. But you cannot involve yourself, it is dangerous.”

“How am I to interfere if I know nothing? What does this note mean? I have asked you twice now.” She waved the note in the air. The large silver turban, adorned with an array of colorful feathers, moved back-and-forth precariously on her head.

Winnifred clutched the little pearl necklace around her neck and ran her thumb over the pearls. She always found this soothing, and she certainly needed to be soothed now.

“Victoria, please. The note speaks for itself.” She took a breath and in a quiet tone, made a report of what they’d discovered by way of

their uncle. She handed her sister the ransom notice and watched as Victoria's entire body shook as she read it. Pugsley ceased his licking and climbed on her sister's lap, providing her with the comfort she needed.

"Poor Uncle Ezekiel. He must feel entirely devastated to have caused such a terrible calamity to befall our family. I ought to send him a message or visit..."

This empathy shown to the man, who may well be the cause of their brother's disappearance, was nothing but further proof to Winnie that she and Victoria could not be more different. While Winnie wanted nothing more than to never see Uncle Ezekiel again, Vicky's first reaction was to seek him out. She shook her head, unwilling to discuss the matter of their uncle.

"In any case, I have another lead. I am going to speak to Seth's cousin right now to see if he has any more information. After this, we will call on Mr. Markham again and from there, we will decide what to do."

She would not admit it to anyone but speaking of herself and Seth as 'we' gave her a thrill. It felt... Right.

"Decide what to do? Of course we're going to have to pay the ransom. How can you even say there is a choice to be made? It is clear. The money must be paid, and then my brother will be returned to us. It is simple. I wish to come with you when you speak to the cousin. And the investigator."

"No," she fired back empathically. "That is not a good idea. I already promised Seth I was not going to involve anybody else in...."

"Seth... Is he the one who truly matters? Or Leo?" Victoria glared at Winnie with such an intensity Winnie had to look away. "I venture to say that in reality, the reason you haven't told me anything is that you did not want me to come between you and your adored Seth."

“Victoria... I object to that assertion.”

“Object all you like. I know you’ve been moon-eyed over Seth for years. You even call him by his Christian name when you ought to call him by his title.”

“You do the same.”

Her sister pushed her turban up. “Not to his face. It is not proper. But you, you do not care. In your mind, you have been the Duchess of Cambarton for years, have you not?”

Anger boiled up in Winnie’s stomach. Under normal circumstances, she would not allow her sister to speak to her in such a way.

I must remind myself that my sister is an impulsive young woman, she certainly is younger than I am, and she does not have the refinement an accomplished lady such as herself should have. Her temper has always gotten away with her.

Even so, the words stung Winnifred. For they were not without truth. She always thought of him in a dreamy fashion and imagined what her life might be like at his side. Until recently, these had been nothing but dreams. Dreams that might now become a reality, unless the potential nightmare that hung above them like an anvil came to pass instead.

“It does not matter what I think of the Duke.”

“Oh, but it matters very much. You are excluding me from the search because of it. I venture to say that you are excluding me because you want to be alone with him. Let me tell you this, Winnifred, I will not stand idly by while my brother is missing and then trust third parties with his recovery.”

“Must you make a difficult situation even more difficult by being so petulant?”

"I am not petulant. I am angry because you have kept all of this from me. I demand to know what we are going to do."

"I've kept all this from you because you are so insufferable. You would have made it much worse with your moods and endless chatter and silly ideas."

Her sister froze as Winnie instantly regretted her harsh words. The pressure of time weighed heavily on her. She had to speak to Seth's cousin and then travel to meet Mr. Markham. And they hadn't even discussed what to do when the time for the ransom exchange came. Nonetheless, her words were cruel. True, but cruel.

"I am sorry," she said quietly, but her sister simply stood, silent and wounded, her dog in her arms.

"Your words don't matter. Your actions do. And your actions have caused me more pain than your words ever could."

Winnie got up as the sisters stood before each other. A long while passed during which the yelps and barks of the little dog were the only sounds.

"I must go. Please, in the meantime, do nothing, Victoria. Please, I beg of you. I shall return this afternoon along with Seth and I promise you that we will talk to you. For now, I cannot waste more time. I must go."

"Waste time? Speaking to your sister is wasting time to you? Well, if nothing else, at least I now know just where I stand in this family, and what the true state of our relationship is."

The comment was like a dagger to Winnie's heart. She wanted to speak to her sister further to smooth over this unfortunate situation, but there was no time.

There was nothing she could say to undo the damage years of discord caused between them. As Winnie left her home, she could

do nothing but hope that one day she and her sister managed to see eye to eye. Although, inside she already knew this would never happen.

Chapter 17

The carriage stopped outside a townhouse in the middle of Mayfair. It was a grand home—Seth had not exaggerated. There were four stories, beautiful wrought-iron balconies in front of several windows, and not a single one was bricked up. It was clear that Seth's father had not feared the window tax as so many other nobles did.

She walked up the stone steps and stopped in front of a heavy blue door. The door knocker was made of brass and in the shape of a dolphin, unusual as door knockers went. She wrapped her hand around it, feeling the coolness of the brass against the inside of her hand, and knocked twice. Almost immediately, the door swung open, and the young man stood before her, a bright smile on his face.

For one instant, she was confused—it was evident at once that he was related to Seth. He had the same heart-shaped mouth as Lady Rose and the same bright blue eyes as Seth. And yet, his demeanor was nothing like either of them. Neither was his attire.

He wore a simple pair of trousers and an oversized white shirt tucked into the trousers and over them a simple green waistcoat. His hair, blond and wavy, hung down to his shoulders, and he stepped aside.

“You must be Miss Winnifred Keating. A message came but a half an hour ago with a letter from my cousin telling me to expect you.” He glanced past her at Mary.

“And you must be the chaperone to ensure that our meeting does not produce any scandal.” As he said the words, he shook his hands in mock fear before winking at them both.

“Heaven forwent, we wouldn’t want a scandal. Not another one, anyhow. As you may know, my mere existence is a scandal.” He stepped aside and motioned for the two women to enter. His flow of words took her by surprise.

“I am Winnifred Keating. It is nice to meet you....” She realized that she didn’t know what to call him. He did not have a noble title, but she was not sure what his last name was, either. He was illegitimate, after all. But hadn’t Seth said his father claimed him?

“Cedric Dunn. My father, His Grace’s uncle, has seen fit to allow me to use his name. But please, you may call me Cedric.”

She followed him down a narrow hall and he motioned toward a small drawing room to the right. As she entered, Cedric turned to Mary.

“If you like, please take the servants’ stairs down. You will come upon Mrs. Holcomb; she is my cook, maid, and general companion. She will be glad to provide you with anything you might require during this visit.”

Mary made her way to the staircase while Cedric followed Winnifred into the room, where he plopped somewhat ungracefully into an enormous armchair.

“Oh, I suppose I should’ve asked you if you wanted anything. Would you care for some tea or perhaps ale? I am sure you are used to much finer things, alas, while I am resident in this grand home, I have neither the fortune nor the title to go along with a place like this. Thus, ale or tea without sugar, it is.”

There was a certain amount of bitterness in his voice, Winnifred could not deny it. She studied the man quietly. The more time she spent with him, the less he reminded her of Seth and Lady Rose—there was a familiarity, yes, she had been right. However, the way he spoke and carried himself told of a very different upbringing and a very different character.

"I do not desire any refreshments, but I thank you, Cedric. I was surprised to learn that Lady Rose and His Grace had a cousin who lives very close to their home."

He sneered. "I am not flabbergasted to hear it. My cousins do not like to acknowledge me. Nor do they call me with any regularity. Lady Rose more often than His Grace. Not that I expected it. I suppose I am fortunate that their father has been so kind to me and allowed me occupancy of these premises, as well as a very modest monthly living."

"Have you always been quite close to the late Duke?"

The young man shook his head and cast his eyes at a painting above the fireplace. It showed two young men. It was clear that the taller broad-shouldered one was Seth's father, for he looked just like his sons.

"My uncle was long embarrassed by my existence. He did not take an interest in me until after my cousin David passed away." He drew his eyebrows together as he considered Winnifred. "Are you aware, I suppose, of my cousin's death?"

Winnifred folded her hands in her lap and nodded. "I am."

"Very well then, I do not need to explain that part. My cousin's death drove a wedge between my uncle and my cousin. I think there was always a part of my uncle that blamed my cousin, but he did so in a silent manner. I know that after David passed away, my uncle showed more of an interest in me. My father had passed away by that time as well."

I wonder if some of the animosity between Seth and his cousin is due to this. His father turned away from Seth after David's death and instead turned to this young man. Perhaps there was more to this than Seth told me. But then, I cannot blame him. What a terrible, tragic life Seth has led. And I did not even know until now how I've misjudged him.

"—you here today?"

Her eyes widened as she hadn't realized he was speaking to her.

"I am sorry, I was lost in thought."

He smiled kindly at her. He seemed a perfectly amiable fellow.

"I've come here to speak to you about Lady Rose. You indicated that while she did not visit with regularity, she occasionally did?"

"She did at least until quite recently. I've asked her to intercede on my behalf with my cousin and... Anyhow. It does not matter. This is why you are here? Lady Rose?"

She carefully considered her following words, for she did not want to alarm him, nor did she want to give too much information away. It was bad enough Victoria knew as much as she did now.

"Yes. Your cousin, Lady Rose, has been missing for the past two weeks, as has my brother. We have attempted to find them but without results thus far. I hoped you might have information that could help us."

He raised his hand and shook his head. Cedric wasn't in the least bit surprised by her statement, Winnie noted, as if the notification of his cousin's disappearance wasn't wholly new to him.

"I understand now why you are here. I was not sure why my cousin would send an associate here. I hoped it was related to my proposition regarding the business, but I see now you are here on a much graver matter."

He got up and took a few steps across the room toward a narrow table under the window. He picked up a piece of paper, and at once, Winnifred's heart sank.

He handed it to her and then resumed his position in the chair. "I was presently waiting for a messenger to deliver this note to my cousin. You may read it. It concerns you, after all."

She unfolded a sheet of paper and was not surprised when she saw the words written upon it. It was in the same penmanship, using almost the same words, demanding the same amount of money, and giving the identical directions as her uncle received.

Although instead of being addressed to *Mr. Keating*, this one was addressed to *Seth, Duke of Cambarton*. She placed the letter on her lap and stuck her hand between her knees to keep them from shaking.

“Did you receive this today?”

The young man shrugged. “I cannot say with any certainty. I do not have a butler in my employ. Mrs. Holcomb is the one who answers the door whenever I am unavailable, and she receives my correspondence and letters. On occasion, she gives them to me, and I will address them. Sooner or later. I never receive anything of any importance. She handed me a stack this morning; that is when my attention was drawn to it. I could not tell you when this correspondence arrived.”

“This is addressed to your cousin. Why would it come here?”

Cedric shrugged again. “My cousin does own this house. Nothing is in my name. It is entirely feasible that whoever sent the letter delivered it here by accident. Besides, our names are similar enough. In any case, I was going to send it to my cousin, perhaps with a little notification asking him once more to meet with me to discuss my proposal.”

“What, pray, is your proposal?”

“I hoped that you were sent here to discuss a business matter. Since you are not, it does not matter.”

He did not say anything for a moment but shifted it in his seat. He raised one hand to his mouth and bit his nails. She recognized it as an obvious sign of nervousness because she was in the habit of chewing her nails as well. As far as habits went, it was difficult to

break.

“Perhaps you could relay a message to my cousin. I assume you are returning to Lester House now with the news.”

Winnifred wasn’t quite sure what to say to this, but since he had handed over the letter without any argument and given her some insightful information into Seth’s background, she did not see any harm in it.

“What is that you wish me to tell him?”

“Let him know that my financial situation is rather dire, I did not exaggerate in my address to him recently. I haven’t the funds to pay Mrs. Holcomb, having already let go of all of the other servants. I am interested in learning the family business, and I am not opposed to making myself useful to him. I know that I am not considered a person of consequence, but if he could find it in his heart, I would be grateful for any assistance.”

She couldn’t help it—there was something about the man that was quite genuine. He was rather open in his desires and needs and lacked the duplicitous mannerism her uncle sometimes displayed.

Still, she could not rule out that this man was just as vexing a relation to Seth and his sister as her uncle was to Leo and her. And perhaps he wasn’t entirely truthful about the arrival of this letter.

I wonder if he really called for a messenger to take this letter to Seth. Furthermore, I wonder if he told me the truth about how this letter made its way into his hands. Was he perhaps biding his time and waiting for Seth to personally call on him, to seek assistance? He had no way of knowing that Seth already had an ally in this quest.

She shook her head. There was no way to know exactly what the young man’s intentions were. She had what she had come for, another piece of evidence. And now she had to make a way back to Seth, for they had a decision to make. The hour of the ransom meeting drew ever closer.

Would they be able to raise funds to pay the ransom in time? Or was it all too late?

Whatever decision they came to, Winnie knew one thing—this truly was now a matter of life-and-death.

Chapter 18

Mr. Markham placed the two ransom note side-by-side and studied them one after another while Seth and Winnifred sat across from him, each lost in their thoughts.

I cannot believe Cedric had a ransom demand letter and did not bring it to me right away. I doubt his tale, anyhow. I've known him to be less than truthful when it suits him. Winnie seemed utterly taken by him, on the other hand. At least, that is the impression I had when she told me about their conversation. Or am I simply experiencing a bout of jealousy?

He glanced up at her. She wore the same evening primrose gown that so beautifully complimented her black hair. Her hair, in turn, was carefully pinned to the top of her head, with a few ringlets falling into her pale face. A white pelisse with large Dorset buttons was placed on top, further bringing out her green eyes.

She looked at him and flashed him a small smile, but it was the kind of smile that did not reach the eyes, a smile shown more to appease one's counterpart rather than one genuinely felt.

"These letters are almost identical," Markham said. "I believe it is safe to say that the same gang has taken both your siblings. And I am confident I know who they are."

Seth's head snapped around. "You are? Tell us, do not leave us in suspense."

Markham cleared his throat and adjusted his large white cravat.

"I received your notification about your visit to St. Giles, Your Grace, and questioned some of my contacts regarding the house you visited."

Winnifred, who had been looking out of the window, turned her attention towards the investigator.

“I am familiar with the area of St. Giles and the house you described venturing into, which I must tell you was a somewhat reckless thing to do and could have had dire consequences for the both of you. Be that as it may, it is indeed a well-known hub for one of the most notorious gangs in St. Giles. They go by the name *The Roamers*.”

Tension filled Seth’s shoulders at the sound of the name. “I have heard of them. I did not think that they were engaged in kidnapping. I thought they were primarily concerned with things such as running the brothels and flophouses.”

“They are. Or rather, they were. Their leader, a man known only as Elton, has dramatically expanded their reach and operations. In addition to relieving members of the nobility of their gold and guineas by way of gambling and satisfying their hunger for pretty young women through their brothels, they engage in some darker activities.”

“Activities such as what?” Winnie asked. Her tone, so filled with weariness, greatly concerned Seth. He knew that her unfortunate encounter with her sister greatly affected her, and the helplessness that consumed him was crushing. His desire to support her and protect her was growing more intense, and yet he knew there was nothing he could do to ease her burden. Their situation was almost impossible. And the decision they would have to make in the next few minutes weighed significantly upon them both.

“Activities such as blackmail.” Markham looked at Seth. “Your Grace, I am sure I do not have to tell you that among your brethren are some who engaged in activities that might place them in *on-dits* at the very least. The scandal sheets have grown hungrier and hungrier for information, and they pay handsomely now. Handsomely enough to interest gangs such as the *Roamers*. They have gathered information about assorted members of the nobility and sold information to the scandal sheets. However, rumor has it

that they started using the information to blackmail those members of the peerage who have the most to lose.”

Seth shook his head. “Many members of high society are born with an inflated sense of self and with a distinct lack of loyalty. We will discriminate against those lower in rank than us and relish in the misfortune of those above us.”

Markham smirked, “There are not many highborn Lords, and certainly no Dukes that I know of, who are as aware as you, Your Grace. It is refreshing to see.”

“I am glad to hear it. Now, what are we to do? What do you know about this Elton?” Seth asked.

Markham sucked in air through his teeth and clicked his tongue.

“He is a dangerous man. My advice is to follow his instructions diligently. Raise the funds, bring the sack of money to the pavilion at the Vauxhall Gardens, and wait for your siblings’ return.”

“What if he doesn’t release them?” Winnifred asked.

“They will. If they do not, then future attempts at kidnapping will not be fruitful. If it becomes public knowledge that Elton breaks his word, nobody will pay a ransom. I am certain, if you do as he says, he will release them. Deviate from his instructions, and I cannot guarantee a happy outcome.”

“But if we do as they say, our siblings will be saved?” Seth asked, the anxiety crashing down upon his chest.

It occurred to Seth that he had no idea how the exchange would take place. With all the people at the Gardens, were Rose and Leo somewhere among them? Surely, if they were, they would call for help. Were the gang members going to take the money and release their hostages at some later time? He brought these concerns up to Mr. Markham, who shrugged.

“Usually, in situations such as this, the gang will take the ransom money, ensure it is all there, and then at some later time release their hostages. I have been involved in an exchange where the hostages were released immediately and at the place of exchange, and others where they were released hours later at a different location. Given that Vauxhall Gardens is not usually very busy in the afternoon, it could be they will bring them there and keep them somewhere on a boat nearby.”

“So you suggest we deposit the money and then wait?”

“I believe so. You could, of course, involve my old colleagues, the Bow Street Runners, and you could set a trap, but if it goes wrong, especially after he specifically stated the authorities are not to be involved...” He shook his head and looked down at his hands.

He didn’t need to complete his sentence, Seth already had a good picture of it. This man Elton was an ice-cold, ruthless killer. For a man to invest this much time into following a nobleman, uncover his darkest secret only to use it against him, spoke of a man who was determined to get what he wanted.

“I will get the money together. It is not easy on such short notice. I wish we had received the demands sooner, but it can be done.”

Beside him, Winnifred agreed. “Yes, we must do so. We will follow their instructions to the letter. We will wait at the Pavilion for the exchange and bring them home.”

Markham cleared his throat. “I believe it would be better if you were not there for the exchange, Miss Keating. I will gladly accompany His Grace to deposit the money, but it is much too dangerous for a lady.”

Winnie narrowed her eyes as irritation settled on her beautiful face. “He is my brother. I will be there. We have come so far, and I have invested so much in this I will not allow you to exclude me. No, Seth and I will both be there alongside you as we recover our siblings.”

Seth couldn't help but smirk. He always suspected there was a fire in Winnifred, but these past few days, he had seen it in all its glory. The passion and the strength of her desire to find her brother only intensified Seth's feelings for her.

All these years, he secretly admired her for her grace, her beauty, and wit—but now that he truly knew her, there was no denying it. He loved her for so much more. Her empathy and integrity, her strength and vulnerability—he loved it all.

When they left the investigator's office with the understanding they would meet tomorrow at Vauxhall Gardens, Seth stopped on the pavement and closed his eyes. He took a deep breath and when he opened his eyes, he found Winnie looking up at him.

"I almost dare not say it, but it seems we are almost at the end of this nightmare."

Seth couldn't help himself. He took her hand in his and held on tightly. "I believe so, Winnie. I really do. And then, I think the two of us have some things to talk about, don't you?"

She beamed at him. "I believe so. Yes. But first, we must make sure everything tomorrow goes to plan."

He squeezed her hand as her small fingers curled around his hand.

"It will. I will have the money; Mr. Markham will be with us—all we have to do is ensure nobody else finds out about our plans. As long as the gang doesn't renege on their promise, and the authorities don't show themselves for whatever reason, all will be well."

They walked away together, their hands still connected and for the first time Seth experienced a sensation he hadn't felt in days—relief.



* * *

A tall man in a distinctive scarlet waistcoat under a dark blue greatcoat passed atop a horse, a member of the horse patrol, Victoria knew. She'd seen them along the roads leading to the country, just outside of London. They were the men who kept the streets safe from highwaymen. They policed the city, and that is what one needed in cases of such peril as her brother was currently in—the proper authorities.

Victoria held the letter in her hand with such a tight grip it bent in the middle. Beside her, Hester waited patiently.

“It is the right thing, isn't it?” Victoria asked.

“I should think so, Miss Keating,” the maid replied.

What a comfort it is to have her by my side. It should be my sister, but since we do not see eye to eye on anything, I must rely upon a servant to be my comfort and strength. But not for much longer. Soon, Leo will be home. And he will see that it was I who did the right thing, not Winnifred. He will be free, along with his love, because I made the correct call. Winnifred and His Grace can pay off the kidnappers, as they ought, but there must be some structure to it all. Someone who knows what they are doing... Besides, even if the kidnappers are paid, who knows if they'll keep their word?

She took a deep breath and craned her neck, taking in the grand building before her. It looked imposing and awe-inspiring, as any building containing the courts and Bow Street Runners headquarters ought, at least in Victoria's opinion.

Yes, the people who worked here were undoubtedly professional and more than capable of taking on this gang. Much more so than

one lone investigator and two people who'd never faced anyone more severe than an ordinary street beggar.

Victoria exhaled, pulled back her shoulders, and walked on. As she gripped the handle and pulled open the door, her eyes wandered to the sign above the heavy oak door.

As she walked into the cool interior of the building, she glanced up and smiled as she read the words written above the door.

Bow Street Magistrate Court

This was the right move. With a smile, Victoria let go of the door and made her way inside. The authorities would bring back her brother, she was certain.

Chapter 19

On Saturday afternoon, Winnifred hastened across the newly opened Regent Bridge toward Vauxhall Gardens. They were forced to make such haste she almost ran into some of the slower-moving pedestrians on the bridge. A little ahead of her, Seth ran, his hair flying in the wind. Their carriage was forced to stop on their way due to an accident that blocked traffic in both directions. She hadn't wanted to look at the carnage as she and Seth exited and rushed down the road, but from the corner of her eye, she'd spotted several people lying on the cobblestones, injured.

There was no time to stop as they could not miss the meeting time. The two of them ran across the bridge as quickly as they could. A sack containing the ransom money swung back and forth from Seth's right hand. The mere knowledge of the vast sum contained within made Winnie ill, but at least nobody else knew just how much money Seth carried with him.

Winnifred could hardly believe that he's been able to raise the sum in such a short time. But then again, he was one of the wealthiest lords in all of England.

"I am afraid we will be too late. Why did the carriage have to get stuck in that awful traffic?" She gasped as they neared the end of the bridge.

Seth glanced at her but did not slow his run.

"We'll make it. Do not fret. We are almost there. Look!" He pointed up ahead to where the bridge ended and where the gardens rose in the distance. A few more minutes and they would arrive.

Winnie had visited Vauxhall Gardens many times but hardly ever so early in the day. The actual attraction of the Gardens was not the

beautiful, graveled walkways or even the orchestra box which stood in the middle of the Gardens—the location where they were to drop the ransom. The real draw was the lights that illuminated the gardens at night. According to Leo, some ten thousand lights were used to create the fairytale-like appearance.

She used to think the Gardens were highly romantic.

To think that I imagined myself visiting here with Seth... Not in my wildest dreams did I consider it would be under these dire circumstances.

Near the end of the bridge, Seth stopped and waited for her to catch up. If only she hadn't worn such uncomfortable half-boots, she might have made her way across the bridge much faster. Winnifred found some solace in knowing that Mr. Markham was already at Vauxhall Gardens. She's seen his carriage pass theirs on the way, just before the accident.

They raced into the Gardens and only stopped when the Pavilion came into view.

"Where... Where are we to take the sack?" Winnifred asked as she attempted to catch her breath. "They said to leave it at the Pavilion's arch, but where exactly? There are three."

He studied the area and then pointed to the center arch. "There, they must mean there."

He gently took her by the arm, and together they made their way across toward the front. There were a great many people in the Gardens, even though it was early. It did not seem a very good location to be making an exchange. When she brought this concern to Seth's attention, he bit his lip and nodded.

"Perhaps it is exactly the heavy occupancy that they like. It will allow them to blend in. They can sneak up to the Pavilion, take the money, and dash away."

“I suppose so. I just wonder if....”

She got no further because right at that moment, Mr. Markham came racing toward them from the direction of the rotunda, his eyes wide and his hands raised in the air as he frantically waved to them.

“Miss Keating, Your Grace, here, quickly.” He waved toward him, and without even a moment’s hesitation, both Winnifred and Seth broke into a run again.

“What is it, Markham? What has happened?” Seth demanded.

“Are we too late? Did they already come and go?” Winnifred gasped.

It was not until she focused on his face that she could tell just how furious Mr. Markham was. His nostrils flared, and his hands curled into fists. His tan face was flushed a deep red, and his eyes stood wide with fury.

“It is a disaster. I wish you had not been late. I wish... Miss Keating, was I not very clear when I said that involving the authorities would result in the possible execution of your siblings?”

Suddenly, Winnifred realized the object of his fury—her.

“Why, yes, Mr. Markham. And I did not call the authorities, as we agreed. I told nobody after our meeting at your office yesterday.” She did not mention that her uncle and sister already knew about the kidnapping prior.

Before Markham could say anything else, Seth took a step in front of Winnifred.

“What are you accusing Miss Keating of? She has been in my company almost exclusively since we came to your office, and I can assure you, she did not call on the authorities.”

Winnifred flushed bright red, even redder than Mr. Markham, for the way Seth presented their situation indeed made it sound as though they spent the night together. They had, of course, not done any such thing.

After leaving Markham's office, she stopped at home to retrieve several of her brother's notebooks and brought them to Lester House, where they spent much of the night pouring over the books.

With Mary's help, she'd also located the letters Rose had sent to Leo. He hid them underneath his mattress, a hiding spot Mary came upon while changing his bedsheets.

While Seth read through Leo's notebooks—which yielded nothing of interest—she'd read Rose's letters. They were profoundly romantic and personal, and she still felt awful for having gained such insight into the young lady's feelings. However, at least she now knew that Rose's feelings for Leo were genuine. When they were free, surely there could be no objection to their being together.

In any case, they'd spent much of the night in this fashion without getting more than two hours of sleep each. To say that she was exhausted was beyond the pale.

"My old colleagues, the Bow Street Runners, are here. I am afraid they have made quite a mull of the situation." Mr. Markham furiously rubbed his eyebrow and looked from Seth to Winnifred and back again.

"The Bow Street Runners are here? But why? I do not understand." Seth exclaimed. His mouth stood agape as he took in this information. "And what do you mean, they have made a mull of it?"

Mr. Markham swallowed hard, Adam's apple bobbing, and he looked away towards the exit. "The Runners appeared half an hour ago and placed a sack under the Pavilion, where we were supposed to deposit the ransom. I spotted them from my hiding place, they are not exactly subtle. Nor are they competent. One of the many

reasons why I have left the force and gone out on my own. Well, as it stood, I was not the only one who spotted them.”

“Oh no... The Roamers? They realized that the authorities are here?” Winnie gasped, for she remembered the grave words of warning in the ransom demand letter.

“Indeed. I will say that some of my former colleagues are not skilled investigators. I didn’t tell you yet that Elton and the Roamers are very high up on the list of suspects the Runners would love to apprehend. I am afraid that the Roamers spotted the Runners. They took the sack as soon as it was dropped, and I watched as the gang members rushed away without even looking into it. Normally, at least they would look inside to make sure it contained money before counting the bounty later.”

“Are you saying the Runner deposited the entirety of the ransom money?”

Mr. Markham looked at her as though she had said the silliest thing. “Of course not, Miss Keating. The sack would have been empty or filled with something to make it feel as though it were money. Which, of course, is an exceedingly stupid thing for my former colleagues to have done. It stands to reason that Elton’s men would search the sack before releasing your siblings from their hiding spot somewhere within the Gardens.”

“Empty?” Winnifred suddenly understood the magnitude of the situation. She shook her head, confused. “Exactly what happened? Why do you believe the Roamers saw the Runners?”

The investigator raised his shoulders and arms and then dropped them; a frustrated sigh escaped his mouth.

“The investigators dropped the sack exactly where they were supposed to, and in short order, one of the gang members appeared to retrieve it, as I said. However, my former colleagues, at least one of them, saw fit to choose that precise moment to come out of their hiding place to rush the man and apprehend him. Another quickly

stopped him before he got to the Elton's accomplice, but if I noticed the attempt, certainly Elton did. It is not for nothing that he is one of the most feared gang members in all of London."

He furiously rubbed his eyebrow and shook his head as if he had never seen such incompetence in all of his life.

Seth had buried his hands in his pockets as he stared into the distance. He pressed lips together with such fury it looked as if he did not have any at all.

"So, I take it the gang members took the sack, were spooked by the attempt to move on them before the exchange was made, and now they are gone?"

"I am afraid, Your Grace, that is exactly what has happened. My former colleagues are presently searching the Gardens for any sign of your siblings, but I am afraid it is too late. If Elton brought your siblings here at all, which I doubt, they would have taken them away again. Most likely, they never brought them here, there are too many people. They probably had them on a boat nearby or hidden elsewhere to release them later. None of the members will be here anymore, and they will have noticed that the bag was empty by now."

"This is a disaster—a complete catastrophe. Not only do they know that the authorities were here, but they will also have received none of their money. What are we going to do, Mr. Markham? And why did you think I was involved? You seemed rather distressed upon my arrival."

The man tucked in his cravat. Some of the redness has gone from his face, but now he could not directly face Winnifred, who stared at him.

"I was able to speak to one of my colleagues for a brief moment, Mr. Weston. He was one of the more reasonable members of the brigade. I asked him who summoned them, and he said it was Miss Keating. I assumed it was you."

Seth glared at Markham. "Well, your colleague must be mistaken, for Winnifred did no such thing. I will gladly vouch for her."

Winnifred said nothing. Instead, she stared out past the Chinese Pavilion towards the other side, where the exchange would've taken place had everything gone to plan.

"Winnie?"

Not even the fact that Seth was using her childhood nickname, a definitive show that he had experienced a change of feelings towards her just as she had, could draw out of her thoughts.

I was supposed to be reunited with Leo. And Seth with Rose. We are supposed to be standing here with our siblings by our side, rejoicing at our reunion. Not to debate over what to do next with our investigator. It all seemed too simple yesterday. Drop the sack of money, watch them take it, and then wait for them to release Rose and Leo. Now it is all in tatters, ruined. And I think I know just who I have to thank for this disaster.

"It was Victoria. My sister. I am sure of it. And if it was Victoria, then she is here somewhere. Somewhere in Vauxhall Gardens. She would not have allowed anyone to talk her out of it. In that, she is much like me." She scanned the area but could not make out the figure of her sister.

"Victoria? Do you think she would be capable of this?" Seth asked, but when she looked in his eyes, it was clear that he already understood. With a deep sigh, he shook his head and retrieved his hands from his pockets. "Mr. Markham, exactly where was the sack the Runners brought dropped?"

The man pointed to the arch at the far right of the Chinese Pavilion, and without a word, the three set off in that direction.

Once they made their way across the middle of the Pavilion, past a crowd of revelers, it did not take long for Winnifred to spot her sister.

Victoria sat with her back to them, near a tall hedge. Her petite frame was hunched over, and her elbows propped up on her legs as her head rested in her hands. She was a picture of misery, but Winnifred felt no sympathy. Slowly she turned to Mr. Markham and Seth.

“I see her over yonder. Please wait for me here. I wish to speak to my sister alone.”

She did not await their reply and instead strode toward her sister while the anger in her chest rose higher and higher. Victoria had managed to ruin it all. As she always did. Victoria was so irrational, so impertinent, that she had destroyed their brother’s safe return. With her blood boiling, Winnifred stormed toward her sister, determined to let her know just how terrible a decision she’d made—and how dire the consequences would be for them all.

Chapter 20

“Victoria!”

Winnifred called out, drawing the attention of a few passers-by. Since it was afternoon, they were not too many regulars in the Gardens, although as the hour drew closer to dusk, more and more people filed in to see the magnificent lights Vauxhall Gardens was so famous for. Not that Winnie cared at present.

Her sister looked over her shoulder, her tear-stained face spoke of the agony she had to be experiencing right now. Still, Winnie didn't feel any softening of her rage. Usually, no matter how much Victoria vexed her, seeing her in tears caused her to let go of her anger and remind herself that Victoria was a very young woman. Not today. She was too angry, too terrified at what might befall their beloved brother now because of Victoria's actions.

“How could you? I asked you not to do anything. I asked you to wait. I had a plan.”

Her sister jumped up and spun around. Immediately, Winnifred was struck by her sister's attire. She wore a white pelisse with yellow swirls painted upon it, over a canary yellow gown, and stark white half-boots. It was the kind of attire one would wear if one were to spend a pleasant afternoon in the Gardens. It was not the kind of gown someone would wear when attempting to keep a low profile as was prudent during such an operation.

But, of course, her sister was foolish and did not realize this. Winnie herself was dressed in her plainest gown, a simple pelisse borrowed from Mary, and a straw bonnet. She intended to disappear into the crowd, not to stand out like her sister.

“I did what I thought I had to.” Victoria defended herself. Winnifred

shook her head, exasperated.

“The letter was particular. It said no authorities or Leo is dead. What were you thinking? Why did you have to get involved? Why could you not just stay at home as I asked you?”

“I am not a child. Please do not treat me like one. Everybody knows that if something happens, authorities must be called. You should never attempt to operate on your own.”

Winnifred exhaled sharply. “Have you learned this from your novels? For this is the real world. Our brother is gone. Our brother has been taken by a gang and will be murdered because of your actions.”

Victoria took a step back and banged with the back of her legs into the bench upon which she had just sat. She gasped and clutched the necklace around her long slender neck as her breathing quickened with the force of Winnie’s words.

“How can you be so cruel? I was only trying to help. I love our brother just as you do. And you shut me out this entire time. Maybe if you included me in your investigation and told me the details of your plans, I would not have needed to resort to this. But you do nothing, you told me nothing. I was rendered helpless, a mere witness to the fate that befell our brother. I knew nothing of what you were planning. I knew nothing other than that my entire family was about to be gone. I couldn’t leave Leo’s fate up to you and His Grace. He’s the only person who cares about me. If he’s gone, then I have nobody but Uncle Ezekiel and Aunt Anna.”

“That is not true. And you know it. I care for you very much.”

Even Winnifred had to admit that her tone did not reflect this proclaimed affection for her sister.

“You do not. And I have always known it. I am sorry that it all went so wrong. When I went to speak with the investigators, they told me their plan was fool-proof. We would leave an empty sack and wait

for them to come to release Leo and Rose. They would then snatch them up and arrest them. They assured me that they knew what they were doing. And I believed them. How could I not? They are the ones we ought to turn to.”

Winnifred shook her head; she did not have any words left. Victoria raised her eyes at her sister and blinked. The tears had stopped running, but the stains remain on her face.

“I know you must hate me now. I can see I was wrong to trust these men, for their only true goal was to arrest the gang and its leader. I’ve found this out by listening to them this afternoon. They didn’t truly care about Leo or Rose at all. If something terrible happens to Leo, I will have to live with it for all of my life.” She shook her head and looked toward the exit. “I will go. There is nothing else left to say. The investigators have gone away, I do not know where to. But I do not wish to remain here waiting. I have ruined it all. And I am sorry. But please know that all I did was out of love for Leo.”

Winnie paused for a moment and then raised her eyes at her sister. “I know that you love our brother. I wish you could’ve just listened to me, but now you’ve endangered him even further.”

Victoria nodded, there was no fight left in her, something that greatly alarmed Winnifred, for her sister always had something to say. No matter what the reason for their disagreements and quarrels, and no matter who was in the right, Victoria never gave in. Today, she did.

As she turned to leave, Victoria pointed to something behind Winnifred.

“It seems your paramour has tracked down one of the Bow Street Runners. His name is Wilson. Mr. Wilson.”

When Winnie looked back, she saw her sister was correct. She saw Mr. Markham and Seth were talking to another man. He was a tall, thin fellow in an ill-fitting outfit that looked like it was trying to drown him alive. She started to make her way toward them when a

sense of responsibility overtook her. Victoria was her younger sister, after all, and no matter what she'd done, she was family.

Her feet twitched as she glanced back over the shoulder. To her surprise, the spot where Victoria stood was empty. Winnie scrutinized the area and spotted her sister, already several feet away, her head hung low, and her shoulders slumped forward.

Off in the distance, Winnifred spotted Hester, Victoria's maid. She wanted to call out to her sister—she did not want them to part on such terrible terms, but she couldn't bring herself to. No, not when Seth and Mr. Markham had finally cornered one of these incompetent investigators. She rushed back to where they were standing, leaving Victoria to return home alone.



* * *

“Miss Keating?” Hester's soft voice drifted to Victoria's ear as she rushed down the gravel walkway.

“Let us go. I can't bear to be here another moment, Hester. My gullibility might've killed my only brother. The only member of my family who truly loves me.”

She rushed along the path. The beautiful large trees on either side of her waved in the wind. How she loved Vauxhall Gardens, it was one of the few places she could visit with both Winnifred and Leo and not fall into quarrels with her sister because there was so much to do and so much to feast your eyes on.

A wave of nostalgia overcame Victoria as she remembered the last time she had been here, not even a month ago. A concert brought the three siblings here together. If she closed her eyes, she could still hear the beautiful music that so enchanted her. She could still

see the thousands of lights that illuminated the Gardens that evening. How peaceful it had been. How easy that banter was between the three of them that night.

They'd enjoyed supper while overlooking the river and reminisced about the many times their parents brought them to Vauxhall Gardens over the years.

To think these Gardens, which have brought me so much joy over the years, should bring about such a tragic end for my brother. And at my hands. I know Winnie's words were unnecessarily cruel, but they were true. It was my foolish decision to involve the authorities that might now cost my brother his life.

"Miss Keating, you know that is not true. Your sister loves you very much. It is just the two of you that have such different temperaments...."

"After today, my sister will hate me forever. And I cannot blame her."

"Miss Keating, it wasn't your fault. I was with you when you spoke to the investigators at the magistrate's court. They seemed ever so sure of themselves. And they have such a stellar reputation for dealing with all the no-good scum in this town. After all, they made quick work of the highwaymen. Surely, nobody could blame you for wanting to trust them."

"I should have been suspicious of their reaction when they saw the letter. They knew the handwriting at once. They knew that it belonged to one of the members of the Roamers. Did you see how wide Henderson's eyes became when he realized this man Elton was involved in Leo's disappearance? He all but salivated at the chance of catching him. They never cared about bringing home Leo and Lady Rose, they only cared about arresting these men."

"That's his occupation in life, Miss Keating," Hester protested. "Do not be so hard on yourself. And do not take your sister's words to heart. She has always been strong-minded, and she will realize how

unjust her words were once she is in a better way.”

Hester, her maid since Victoria turned five-and-ten, was an older woman, not quite as old as their mother would have been, had she lived, but certainly older than most of their maids. Victoria usually found Hester’s mere presence a comfort, as something about her reminded Victoria of her mother.

Today, however, not even Hester’s soothing tone could put a stop to the self-hatred that overcame Victoria. As they passed the rotunda and stepped out of the Gardens and into the street, she could not help but wonder just how she was to continue in this life if something terrible happened to Leo.

No, Victoria was certain she would not have one joyful day in all of her life if her brother did not come back to them. She could never forgive herself—and neither would Winnie.

Chapter 21

They argued, it was evident even from this distance. Seth's heart ached for Winnifred even more. Not only did they receive such terrible tidings, but now she had to contend with the fact that her sister was the one who endangered their brother's life. And Rose's.

"Weston, what were you thinking? Did it not occur to you that this may all end in a disaster?" Mr. Markham asked, clearly exasperated at his former colleague. Mr. Weston stood before him, a picture of misery.

"It wasn't my decision, you know that. Henderson's in charge, always has been. And you know how eager he is to catch Elton. So the moment that young lass walked into the station and told us her sibling had been kidnapped, there was no stopping him. He suspected it was Elton right away, and the letter she showed us with the handwriting only confirmed it."

"I see, so it was the letter? That's how you put it together?" Mr. Markham said, his arms crossed in front of his chest.

"You're not the only one capable of running an investigation, Markham. Just because you left didn't mean everything fell apart. And yes, we realized the lettering on the blackmailing note was the same as another we received some weeks ago. A wealthy Earl received one on account of his keeping a mistress out in Kent. Didn't want his wife to find out—seeing how she's the wealthy one. Also didn't want to pay the money since he didn't have any. Anyhow, that's how we put it all together."

Markham scoffed at this. "And yet, when it came to putting it all together, you failed. I never would've run such a haphazard investigation. And who was that laughingstock, anyway, who rushed for the Roamer retrieving a sack?"

“A new fledgling named Mr. Thomas. Henderson is fond of him.”

Markham scoffed. “If you ask me, that guy is not cut out to be a constable, let alone a Bow Street Runner.”

The younger man was about to reply when Seth raised his hands, exasperated. “Gentlemen, I do not care to bear witness to your squabbling. I want to know what the plan is? What are we to do?”

Markham and Weston exchanged a glance, but neither said anything. With dismay, Seth realized that neither the brilliant investigator nor the man involved with the authorities had any clue what to do next.

Of course they do not. None of them planned beyond today. Mr. Markham thought the exchange would happen today. And Weston seems as though he is relatively low on the ladder of hierarchy within the organization, so he is clueless. They don't know what to do. How utterly useless, the lot of them. And meanwhile, only heaven knows what happens to my sister and Leo. I must take things into my own hands, it seems.

He looked toward Winnifred, who had parted with her sister and made her way toward him. The shock of this afternoon's events was inscribed all over her face. Her beautiful black hair had come loose from its restraints and partially hung down her shoulders, while her plain gown was wrinkled and gave her an almost disheveled appearance.

There was nothing he wanted more than to rush to her and wrap her in his arms, but he knew that wouldn't do. Not out here in public. Even if they were already officially courting, such a display of affection was not acceptable.

“How could this all go so wrong?” Winnifred demanded when she stopped beside them, her eyes darting from one man to another.

“It would have all gone off without a hitch,” Weston said with some indignation, “if the gang had not spotted us.”

“It sounds as though it was your incompetence that caused all of this. So, I will ask you once again, what are we to do now? The Runners ruined it all, so how do you intend to set this right?”

The younger man swallowed and shrugged, evidently not at all accustomed to being addressed by a lady.

“I wish I could tell you there was a plan. Elton was supposed to be in our custody right now. Your siblings would have been returned one way or the other. My fellow investigators have searched the area and found neither any members of the gang, nor your siblings. All I can do is return to the magistrate’s office and find out what Henderson plans to do next.”

Winnifred frowned. She’d missed much of the conversation and was thus confused.

“Seth, I do not understand....”

“I shall explain it all,” he said and gently reached for her hand. Even though it was inappropriate, he had reached out to her; he needed her to feel his support as he did hers. Beside them, Markham cleared his throat.

“I will accompany you, Weston. I have a few things I would like to say to Mr. Henderson myself in regards to this investigation.” He pressed his lips together and glanced at Seth. The man looked furious, he was clearly not used to his plans not working out.

“If you would meet me in my office tomorrow, I can let you know what I found out. I will also venture into St. Giles and see what other leads I may uncover this day. It is early yet.”

There was nothing else Seth could do or say, and so he simply nodded. His stomach clenched at the thought of the many hours they’d have to pass between now and tomorrow. There was nothing they could do. No further questions they could ask, no more books to read, no more letters to uncover. They knew the truth. Leo and Rose were blackmailed regarding their secret affair and then

kidnapped in order to elicit a ransom. And all of it because Ezekiel Keating could not pay his gambling debt.

He glanced at Winnifred. The sense of gratitude swelled within him at having her by his side. Her presence gave him such comfort it was immeasurable. Without her, he would not be able to make it through this ordeal. And yet, he didn't know what would become of them both if their siblings met with an unthinkable fate.



* * *

The two men excused themselves to rejoin the investigators while Seth and Winnifred remained at Vauxhall Gardens. They walked along the gravel pathway as he gave her a full report on what he learned. In turn, she informed him of her sister's involvement. When she concluded, a strained silence fell between them. It wasn't broken until Winnifred let out a long, desperate sigh and glanced at him.

"Seth, I am so sorry. My sister has ruined everything. She is so reckless. She did not even know Mr. Weston's proper name when she told me about him."

He swallowed; there was a part of him that wanted to agree with her. Victoria certainly made a muddle of everything. Without her, the gang would have picked up the sack of money, and if Mr. Markham was correct, their siblings would be with them now.

Yet, at the same time, she was also Winnifred's sibling. Should anything happen to Leo, Victoria would need Winnifred, and Winnifred would need Victoria. Whether they wanted to admit it or not.

"You have nothing to be sorry about. And your sister did what she

thought was right. Unfortunately, she discovered the note, but perhaps we were wrong to keep her in the dark for as long as we did.”

He chewed the inside of his cheek as he considered this.

“I felt bad about not telling her, but I knew she could not be trusted. I do not know what to do. I am so angry at her, so furious,” Winnifred continued.

He gently took her arm, and they started walking again, this time towards the exit. The sun was beginning to sink in the sky, and he knew that the later the hour, the more people would descend upon Vauxhall Gardens. He did not wish to be around a great many people this evening. The only thing he wanted to do was to return to Lester House, with Winnifred by his side.

He knew the only comfort he could draw this evening was from her. And how strange it was to realize this, for just days ago, he’d been opposed to investigating the case with her. He wanted the opposite then—to stay away from her.

“I know that you were angry. But there is something you have taught me these past few days. It isn’t good to shut people out. It isn’t good to keep secrets, to lock yourself away behind a wall of silence. I would not like it for you to break with your sister entirely. And I cannot help but think what it must’ve been like for her.”

He looked over at Winnifred, who didn’t reply. But he saw in her face is that she was taking in his words. Slowly, her tongue slid over her dry lips as she considered his words.

“She looked so broken. I know she’s wracked with guilt. And I did not help. I must confess, I was rather cruel to her. I said some regrettable things.”

“It is understandable. We came here assuming that we would leave happily with Leo and Rose once we had given the ransom money. Truly, I thought this evening my biggest challenge would be to

inspire both of them to admit their secret relationship to us. I envisioned this evening as lighthearted, the four of us seated together celebrating their return. That is if they were in a condition to celebrate, as we do not know how the gang is treating them. However, in my mind, I had painted the picture of peace and joy.”

Finally, she turned her head, a small smile played around her lips. “As did I, Seth. I had thought of many things I could say to Leo regarding his keeping his romance with Rose secret. There are so many things I could tease him with. There were so many things I wanted to tell him. And then when we came here, and Mr. Markham told us what happened... It all fell apart. And now we do not know if we shall ever see them again.”

Her voice broke as she spoke, and her beautiful eyes were misted with tears. He pulled her arm closer.

“We will see them again. I know it.” Seth could only hope that his voice sounded convincing, for inside, he was not at all sure. Would they get another chance at making a ransom payment? Surely these men still wanted their money.

“I haven’t got any hope anymore. I allowed myself to believe that today was the day my brother would come home. I slept peacefully last night, thinking he would be back. And now it’s all ruined. All hope is gone.....” The tears could not be contained any longer and ran down her face like a river.

Her slim shoulders shook as she sobbed, and Seth no longer cared about etiquette or either of their reputations. Instead, he pulled her toward him into a tight embrace and caressed her hair as he gently whispered in her ear.

“Do not lose hope yet. Mr. Markham will speak to the Bow Street Runners and see what their plans are. And he will find out more. You will see tomorrow when we go to his office. He will have a plan for us. And do not forget, what these men want is money. It is their motivator.”

“They said they would kill them if they didn’t get the money, if we involve the authorities. Do you think it is true?”

Without letting go of him, she looked up into his eyes. Seth wetted his lips; he did not want to lie to her, he did not want to tell her that he was entirely uncertain, for he did not know any more than she. But at the same time, the way she looked at him, so helpless, so distraught, he knew he had to lie. And so, he did.

“I am sure. Now let us go, we must return to the house and wait for the morning. And then tomorrow, Mr. Markham will have a new plan, and everything will be well.”

They made their way through the park and back across the bridge, where finally they spotted their carriage and entered. And the entire time, he did not let go of her hand. It was her hand, the connection to her, that was the only thing that kept him sane.



* * *

When they arrived outside the Keating home, Seth jumped out of the carriage to help her out. She was so lost in thought that the man standing by the stairs entirely escaped her attention. It wasn’t until she was on the pavement next to Seth that her eyes settled on the familiar figure.

“Uncle Ezekiel? What are you doing here?”

Winnifred was not in the mood to speak to her uncle, not at this moment in time. Not with everything gone so wrong, and on top of that, her falling out with her sister. Alas, there was nothing she could do. He was already here, and by the expression on his visage, he was in high dudgeon as well.

“Winnifred! Have you just returned from Vauxhall Gardens? Tell me what happened and what”

He stopped in his tracks and stared at Seth, who was standing behind her. Immediately his countenance changed, and his face reflected the great dislike he held within him against those above him in the station. He glowered at Seth, who forced himself to remain civil. Although she could tell by the way his shoulders had tensed and how his fingers twitched as if he wanted to roll them into fists, he contained himself, knowing that it was Winnifred’s uncle who caused much of this.

“Your Grace,” her uncle said through clenched teeth. He bowed; it was the kind of bow she had seen people give those who they highly despised. There was no reverence and no respect in it.

Seth, to his grade credit, nodded at her uncle. “Mr. Keating.”

He turned to Winnifred. “Perhaps I ought to let you speak to your uncle alone. I shall return to Lester House. If you like you may call on me later and perhaps we can dine together. Or if you would rather wait until tomorrow, I can collect you before we go to Mr. Markham’s office. Send word either way.”

Winnifred’s stomach clenched. She did not want Seth to leave. She was out of her mind with worry, unimaginable images played in her head again and again of what these men might be doing to her brother. It was only when she looked at Seth that they subsided, but she also knew that her uncle would not tell her whatever he’d come here to say in front of Seth.

With a heavy heart, she nodded and curtsied, as was customary to do in front of a Duke.

“Very well, Your Grace. I shall send word later on. Fare you well.”

The formality between them made him smile, which in turn warmed her heart. They were so informal around one another that she knew it would be considered highly unusual, but she always

made sure to call him by his proper title in front of company, as did he.

“Miss Keating,” he bowed and took her hand, placing a gentle kiss upon her glove. Then, when he rose to his full height again, he looked at her uncle, the disdain visible in his beautiful eyes. “And Mr. Keating.” He bowed slightly and turned. As he jumped into his carriage and the vehicle rolled away by way of the cobblestone street, Winnie’s heart already ached for his company.

Chapter 22

While Seth returned to his own home, Winnifred climbed the steps to hers, her uncle directly behind her.

Her hands shook as she stepped through the arched doorway and into the hall. Her uncle's breathing was so ragged she could tell his guilt and vexation troubles him deeply. The butler, Mr. Purvis, appeared and relieved them of their accessories before leaving them alone. Winnie motioned for the drawing room to the right as her uncle stepped inside.

It is always so odd to see him here, in our home. He hardly ever visited when Father and Mother lived, and even now, when he comes to call on us, he usually waits outside. I always wondered why that was. Envy? No, it can't be. He despises the wealthy and powerful. He never tires of telling us how much he loves his home in Clerkenwell. Perhaps memories. This used to be his childhood home, after all.

Inadvertently her thoughts traveled back to Seth and the painting of his brother displayed in Rose's bed chamber. Childhood memories could be haunting, she knew that. She just never realized how profound Seth's childhood had affected him. Not that she could have, given that he never shared anything with her until so very recently.

"Uncle Ezekiel, please take a seat."

He shook his head and paced back and forth. "I would rather not. Winnifred, what happened? Why is Leo not here? Have they not released him yet?"

She swallowed, suddenly realizing why he was here. It was indeed guilt that had driven him out of Clerkenwell and all the way to Mayfair. Again, she swallowed and wrapped her arms around

herself.

“He is not here. The exchange went wrong. The Bow Street Runners were there, and I am afraid....”

At the mention of the authorities, her uncle stopped in his tracks and glared at her. “The Bow Street Runners? Are you entirely bird-witted? Was it not clear enough? To call in the authorities is but a death sentence for your brother.”

“It was not her fault, Uncle. I called on them.”

Winnifred was surprised when Victoria stepped into the room, Pugsley at her side.

“You, Victoria?” He spoke the words as if he had never heard such an impossibility in all of his life. He stared at her, taking in her slight figure. She had changed out of her yellow gown and was now in a plain pale pink round gown, a silk shawl slung around her shoulders.

“Yes, I went to them to report Leo’s kidnapping, and they made a plan to apprehend the gang that took him. But it went wrong.”

The regret sounded with every word she spoke, and somehow her sister’s melancholy appearance did cause a shifting in Winnie’s heart. She could tell that she was genuinely distressed at the results of her actions. And Winnifred knew that her own harsh words earlier only contributed further to her sister’s current state.

Victoria seated herself in the armchair nearest to the fireplace and crossed her legs at the ankles. She drew the shawl closer around herself like armor and then blinked at her uncle. There was something in her countenance as she looked up at her uncle. A desire to be comforted and reassured.

Alas, it was evident from the expression in Uncle Ezekiel’s face that he was not in any condition to give either.

"I cannot believe you did that, Victoria. I received the kidnapping letter first, and it stated very clearly what would happen if the authorities were involved. How could you?" The accusatory tone startled even Winnie. Victoria drew back and pushed herself into the back of the chair, taken aback by the sudden verbal assault.

"I thought it best, Uncle. I felt I was doing the right thing."

"You thoughtless, silly girl. How could you?" Victoria opened her mouth to defend herself but before she could, their uncle turned his attention to Winnifred. "How could you let her do such a foolish thing?"

"I am not Victoria's keeper. It is very unkind of you to be so cruel to her."

Victoria glared at her, and Winnifred was aware of the hypocrisy in the statement. She had, after all, addressed her sister with just as much contempt just a few hours before.

"This is not the time for kindness. We must do everything we can to bring Leo back alive. And the way to do this was to pay the ransom. You did raise all of the ransom, did you not, Winnifred?"

"I did not. However, His Grace did. Alas, before we could make our way to the park, the Bow Street Runners had already made a move, and the gang recognized they were there. They made off with an empty sack."

Her uncle's face paled, and he dropped into the nearest available chair with a plop. He rubbed his eyebrows furiously as a groan escaped him.

"This is an unmitigated disaster. Oh, Winnifred, Victoria. They will surely kill Leo now."

"You don't know this! You don't. After all, all these people want is money. So what purpose would it serve to kill Leo?"

The panic in Victoria's voice sounded with every single word she spoke. Winnie remembered the words Seth had spoken to her, so similar to Victoria's assertions.

"She is not wrong. What they wanted was the ransom. There is still a chance. We are waiting for Mr. Markham to speak to his former superiors to devise a plan."

"A plan! "Her uncle exclaimed. "There already was a plan. It was simple. The money was to be deposited at the predetermined location. Once the money was collected, Leo would've been set free."

He glared at Victoria, who continued to sit quietly in her chair. She examined the tips of her fingers in an almost nonchalant way, but Winnifred could see just how shocked her sister was at their uncle's furious response. Until now, Uncle Ezekiel had always been kind to Victoria. He and Aunt Anna were incredibly close to the girl.

"I just wanted to help."

Her uncle scoffed. "What would have helped was to follow the letter the gang provided. Now you've ruined it. I cannot believe you. So stubborn, so insolent. You act like a child, not as a young lady."

Victoria gasped and finally raised her eyes. "Uncle Ezekiel... I am sorry."

"Sorry will not help you when we have to put your brother to rest because of your actions."

Before she knew it, Winnifred jumped out of her seat and stepped between her uncle and sister.

"I will not have you talk to her like this, not in our own home. My sister's actions might have been reckless, and the consequences might be dire, but let us not forget who caused the situation to

begin with. It was not Victoria. It certainly wasn't Leo. It was you. Your gambling habits. You caused this, Uncle Ezekiel. Had you not borrowed money from this man, none of this would've happened."

Uncle Ezekiel likewise jumped out of his seat and faced off to Winnie. Her uncle was not a tall man, and they saw almost eye to eye.

"Elton would have gladly taken the ransom money and released Leo. It was not trying at all. The instructions were simple."

Winnifred frowned at this. Something about her uncle's statement struck her as rather peculiar, but she could not put her finger on what it was. It took her a second but then when she thought back to the conversation at his house the previous day; it came to her.

"Did you not tell me that you never knew the name of the person who loaned you the money? Did you not make a grand show out of telling me just how secretive these people were? I recall asking you who lent you the money, and you said you did not know the name. Now, suddenly, you know it was Elton?"

Her uncle swallowed, and his eyes grew wide.

"You must've used his name. For I certainly did not know it before now."

From the corner of her eye, Winnifred noticed her sister shifting.

"I arrived here just after your conversation started, and I know for certain that Winnifred did not use the name, Elton. I know it because the Bow Street Runner I made my report to mentioned it. But Winnifred did not. Uncle Ezekiel, did you really not know who loaned you the money?"

To Winnifred's surprise, Victoria crossed the room and stopped beside her. Having her sister by her side was unexpected but comforting. For the first time in many years, she felt she and her

sister were united on a quest to elicit the truth from their duplicitous uncle.

“Yes, Victoria is right. How did you know who loaned you the money?” Their uncle took a step back towards the door.

“I... I do not know what you mean. I did not know the man’s name. You certainly must have used it. And if not, then maybe one of his associates I deal with mentioned it at some point. I do not know. In any case, I only came here to see how the exchange went in order to welcome my nephew home. But, seeing how it all ended in disaster, I must return home to inform your aunt. She will be ever so heartbroken.”

“No, Uncle. I think you owe us an explanation. You came here ready to accost me for attempting to involve the authorities, and yet all along, it seems you have been keeping secrets from us.” Victoria stood with her arms crossed in front of her chest.

“Victoria is right. You are keeping things from us. What do you know? You have not told us the whole truth,” Winnifred demanded, her head tilted to one side and her eyes wide open as she glared at their uncle.

However, he shook his head and turned. He hastily made for the door with both Winnifred and Victoria on his heels.

“Wait. Where are you rushing off to? What is it you’re not telling us?” Victoria shouted. The shrillness of her voice made Winnie’s skin crawl, and she rolled her eyes. If only Victoria could contain her emotions. However, she never had been able to, and she likely never would. In this situation, Winnifred couldn’t even blame her—she, too, wanted to scream at her uncle.

At the door, their uncle looked back at them. “I am keeping nothing from you. And I will not have my own family make such accusations against me. Do you not think that I would tell you the truth? We all know that it was my actions which caused Leo to be taken in the first place. I already feel bad enough as it is without

your accusations. I shall leave now. Please inform me if and when there are any new developments.”

He rushed out of the door as both girls followed him. Victoria was ready to run after him, but Winnifred grabbed her by the arm.

“Let him go. It will do us no good.”

“But he knows more than he’s telling us.” The worry in her sister’s voice ached.

“I know it. But there is nothing we can do. If he is not willing to tell us more, we cannot force him. All we can do is rely on Mr. Markham now. Let us hope and pray that he comes up with a plan.”

Her sister’s shoulders dropped as beside her, Pugsley jumped up on his hind legs and pawed at her gown.

Victoria bent down and picked up the little dog as he yelped. She cradled him in her arms, and the dog proceeded to lick her face, eliciting a smile.

Suddenly, Winnifred felt a tickling sensation around her ankles, and when she looked down, she saw that her cat, Bell, had joined the dog out on the front steps. The cat purred and looked up at her. Winnie squatted down and scratched Bell’s neck as the purring got louder and louder.

“It seems both of our pets know that we are at sixes and sevens,” said Victoria.

Winnie glanced up at her sister, and somehow, she realized there had been a shift between them.

“It seems so. Vicky, I am sorry for my unforgiving tone earlier. I was so distraught at what occurred at Vauxhall Gardens I could not control my emotions.”

"I know it. And I cannot blame you. I should have listened to you. I had a bad feeling when I spoke to the investigator, Henderson, but I dismissed it because I was so convinced I was doing the right thing. You must believe me. All I ever wanted was to bring Leo home safe."

The cat, having received the attention she craved, turned and rushed back into the house. Winnifred stood across from her sister and reached for her free hand, squeezing it.

"And I am sorry that I did not involve you more. I know that you and I have never been close, and I fear that we never will be. But you are still my sister, and Leo is still your brother. I was wrong to keep you so far removed from the search. So let us make a vow to not keep each other in the dark anymore."

Her sister smiled at her weakly. "I can agree to that. It seems that you and His Grace have been very thorough in your investigation. Unfortunately, even if I wanted to, I do not have the strength to continue to make further inquiries. Thus, I shall leave it to you and him and... Is that him? Sprinting down the street?"

Winnifred turned in the direction her sister indicated and, indeed, hurrying down the road was none other than Seth. His blonde hair flew behind him as he ran down the street.

Winnifred's mouth dropped open as he stopped before them, for his eyes were so wide and so full of fear she knew something terrible happened. Winnifred took a step back and instinctively grabbed Victoria's hand, who clutched it in return.

"What is it, Seth? What has happened?"

"You must come at once. Mr. Markham and Mr. Weston called on me just now. We have news."

Winnifred's heart dropped to her knees as she stood trembling. Mr. Markham was to make inquiries and they were not to see him until morning. Why had he come back so soon? Shaking, she grabbed the

railing to steady herself as she stared at Seth and waited to received whatever tidings he'd come bearing.

Chapter 23

“What happened?” Winnifred asked when Seth came to a halt in front of her house. He grabbed onto the wrought iron railing and bent forward, panting as he attempted to catch his breath.

“Mr. Markham... He came back from meeting with the leader of the Bow Street Runners. He says...” Suddenly he realized just how exposed they were, standing outside, the sisters on the stairs and he on the pavement. Anyone could hear their conversation.

“Let us go inside.”

The three rushed in, and he took note that Winnifred and Victoria appeared almost supportive in each other’s presence. What a difference compared to a few hours earlier. Did this have something to do with their uncle suddenly calling on them?

“What did Mr. Henderson say?” Victoria asked the moment the door shut behind them.

“Mr. Markham was rather upset by Mr. Henderson and his lack of consideration for Rose and Leo. It seems the man’s only regret is that he failed to catch Elton or any member of his gang. Now that they have lost their chance, there’s not much interest in doing anything to retrieve our kidnapped siblings. It seems Mr. Henderson wishes to wait for further communication. He has asked Mr. Markham to relay to us that should we receive a message from the kidnappers, we are to let them know so they can take another try at catching them.”

“It is disgusting—we are to do nothing but wait?” Victoria gasped.

“It is an out-and-out scandal. We must do something. We ought to let all of society know how little the Bow Street Runners care about

our safety. I will have all of Almack's talking about it on Wednesday. That ought to inspire them to act," Victoria argued while Seth raised his hands.

"I approve that we should teach them a lesson. However, I do not think we will have until Wednesday. This is why I am here. Mr. Markham came straight to me from the magistrate's office to give me the news. His former colleague, Mr. Weston, whom you met at Vauxhall Gardens, has agreed to be of assistance. Not all members of the Bow Street Runners are as useless as today's proceedings indicate. Mr. Weston has a contact within Elton's gang, and he can deliver a message to him."

Victoria raised one finger to her mouth and chewed. Seth could not deny the resemblance between the sisters, especially when it came to this rather unfortunate habit.

"Mr. Weston assured me his contact would be able to deliver a reply today, perhaps within the hour. They departed my home nearly half an hour ago, they will have arrived in St. Giles. As long as the contact can be located right away, we will have an answer soon. It will be delivered here to your home. I hope that does not cause you any distress."

Winnifred placed a pillow on her lap and pressed it against her body as she considered this. "I think it is for the best. I only hope that it will not take too long, for I do not know that my nerves will be able to take a lengthy wait."

"Mine cannot! I am already fatigued from the events of today. Indeed, I declare I am at sixes and sevens. I do not know how I can stand it."

Winnifred looked at her sister, and to Seth's surprise, she smiled at her. "I know it will be a frustrating wait, but it cannot be helped. If Fortune is kind to us, we will know our brother's fate within a few hours. So why not take a rest?"

Victoria shook her head. "I do not think I'll be able to rest. Indeed, I

have not slept in two days.”

“Mary!” Winnifred called out, and within a moment, a woman whom Seth had seen several times but never spoke to, presented herself at the door.

“Please prepare one of my special nighttime teas for my sister. She requires respite.” The maid curtsied to Winnifred and left.

“Your laudanum tea? I do not ordinarily care for such tinctures, but I would much rather escape into the world of sleep than spend hours and hours worrying myself into an early grave,” Victoria said as she rose. She proceeded to curtsy to Seth. “I shall bid you farewell, for now, Your Grace, and I must beg your pardon for my actions.”

Seth bowed and forced himself to smile at the young lady. There was no use in being disagreeable with her, as there was no undoing her actions. The very best they could do was beg forgiveness from the gang members and hope for a positive outcome.

“It will do no good to continue troubling yourself. I trust that you will learn from the events and not make similar mistakes in the future.”

Victoria colored up so red she almost matched the carpet upon which she was standing. She dashed out of the room, and Seth took a seat across from Winnifred.

“I dare say your words of wise counsel may have had more of an effect upon my sister than anything I have ever said to her all of these years,” Winnifred said. Even though her tone was stern, there was a slight twinkle in her eye.

“I did not wish to be unkind, but her actions did cause us great distress.”

Winnifred shook her head. “I know that my sister and I disagree

often. But at the end of the day, we cannot forget it who is really at fault. My uncle.”

Winnifred gave Seth a full report on their visit with her uncle, and he was left shaking his head by the end of the tale.

“It seems there is much your uncle is keeping to himself.”

Winnifred nodded. “I must agree. If he lied about knowing Elton, what else has he lied about? I wish to set the Bow Street Runners upon him, but I am afraid he has done nothing illegal. When all of this is said and done, he will get away with it. Once Leo and Rose are back in our midst, all my uncle will have lost is perhaps a few hours of sleep. He will not even have to repay the debt owed to Elton, for Elton will be in Newgate prison awaiting the gallows.”

Seth swallowed and shifted in his seat, suddenly uncomfortable. “I venture to say that is not all he will have lost. If he’s genuine in his regrets at having caused this tragedy to befall your cousin, he will be plagued with the results of his actions for many years.”

He paused and raised his eyes when Winnifred looked at him quizzically. “I have struggled for many years with the part I played in David’s death. As I told you, I have never spoken to anyone about him the way I have you. Not even Leo. I have shut myself off. I have lost my close connection to Rose to the point where she did not even trust me enough to tell me she had fallen in love. And while my servants respect me and are loyal, I know they also fear me, for I am known to have a challenging temper. A temper which once again is grounded in the guilt and shame I carry with me every day over what happened to David.”

“But Seth, you cannot compare the tragic fate that befell your brother with what happened to Rose and Leo. For what my uncle did, it was quite by design, where what happened to you was an accident—a tragic accident—but an accident nonetheless. You weren’t to know that lightning would strike the oak tree and kill your brother. My uncle certainly must’ve expected that there could be dire consequences from borrowing money from a gang leader

such as Elton.”

Seth averted his eyes. He did not want her to see just how deeply her words struck him. She spoke the truth, and he knew it. He'd always known what happened to David was not his fault. At least the rational part of his mind knew it. But his heart never entirely believed it.

“Winnie, I cannot tell you what it means to hear you say this out loud. I do not like to admit it, but I have felt judged all of my life by my loved ones. The truth is, after David died my mother wilted away and died shortly after. True, she was already ill, but David's death only hurried her demise. And my father, he never recovered. Instead, he turned away from me.”

Winnifred blinked and wetted her lips before speaking. “Your cousin, Cedric... When I called on him, he implied just such an estrangement.”

Seth couldn't help but scoff. “Cedric was the one who benefited the most from the estrangement between my father and me. He would have nothing to do with Cedric before my uncle died. Too great was the shame of having my uncle's by-blow in the family. Indeed, my father would've cast him out. It wasn't until after my uncle and David both died that my father suddenly took an interest.” He stared at his fingers, moving them slowly up and down as he thought of the many strained conversations he had with his father; how many times he was cast aside in favor of Cedric, a bastard.

When he looked at Winnifred again, their eyes met across the little wooden table between the armchair and the chaise. There was such empathy in her beautiful green eyes, his heart melted once more. Without knowing he was even moving, he rose and sat beside her, then took hold of her hands just as he had on the walk back from Vauxhall Gardens.

“Winnifred, the truth is, the rejection I experienced at the hands of my family has pushed me behind these walls that I could never tear down. You told me that you assumed I never married because I was

waiting for a Duke's daughter, someone from the upper class. But the truth is I never married because I could never allow myself to face the rejection I experienced at my father's hands. However, I cannot deny that there has been a lady who has taken up a part of my heart for some years now. And an ever-growing part in my heart at that." He raised his hand and placed it on her cheek, gently caressing it with his thumb.

The sensation of her silky-smooth skin under his thumb sent jolts of a strange tingling sensation all through his body. His toes curled with exhilaration, and he could not help but break into a smile.

Winnifred placed one hand over his and closed her eyes, pushing her face further into the palm of his hand.

"Faith. If only you knew how I have longed for this. I have spent many years waiting for.... "

The sound of someone banging loudly against the front door forced the two of them apart. Seth dropped his hand to his side and dashed across the room into the hall, followed closely by Winnifred.

Mr. Purvis, the Keating family's butler, rushed to the door and threw it open. Standing there was a man wearing a black cloak, its hood pulled far onto his face so that the shadows obscured his features. He handed a letter to Mr. Purvis who glanced at it, and before any words could be exchanged, the cloaked man turned and hurried away. When the butler turned his grey eyes, he squinted at Winnifred.

"Miss Keating, this letter is addressed to His Grace."

Winnifred quickly retrieved the letter from the butler's hands and gave him a nod.

"Yes, Mr. Purvis, we have been expecting it. Please leave us."

As the butler departed, Seth attempted to walk back into the

drawing room, but Winnifred shook her head. “No, the drawing room is too exposed for information as sensitive as this. I’m afraid.... “

Her words trailed off, but Seth already knew precisely what she wasn’t able to say. If the news was grave, she did not wish to be anywhere near visitors. She did not want to be seen nor heard. And he understood, yes, he was grateful. For he, too, feared what his reaction might be if they received disturbing news.

“Let us go to the library. When Leo is not here, and I am not using it, it is never occupied. Nobody will venture there; we will not be bothered.”

The plain blue gown she wore at Vauxhall Gardens swished as Winnifred rushed up the steps and then down the hall and into the library. Then, as Seth followed her into the grand room, she shut the heavy oak doors behind them, and then, only then, did she hand him the letter.

He hadn’t realized just how terrified he was until she placed the letter in his hands and he saw how much he was shaking. He trembled so much he could not hold on to the letter, and if it weren’t for Winnifred clasping her hands around his, he would certainly have dropped it to the floor.

“Whatever this letter contains, we must remind ourselves that we are not alone. We have one another now. And we must be strong. For each other. And for Victoria, for it is she, not my uncle, who will suffer the effects of her actions all of her life. She is a silly girl, but she is sensitive as well.”

Even in this hour, which surely had to be one of the darkest of Winnifred’s life, she still thought of others. The love filled Seth’s heart as he looked at her and assented to her request.

“I promise I will be here for you. And Victoria. Whatever the news.”

And with that, Seth unfolded the letter and began to read.

Chapter 24

He did not have to speak the words, for his countenance told her all she needed to know. With every single word he read, his face turned pale and paler, his beautiful rich lips trembled as he mouthed the words. When he finished reading and lowered the letter, he cast his eyes in her direction, and the sorrow, the depth of despair, could not be denied. The news, Winnifred knew, was grave.

She steadied herself against the door frame, a hand digging into it as though it could somehow keep her from fainting upon hearing the awful truth.

“It is bad, is it not?”

His voice trembled as he replied, and she noticed how the gentle shaking that took hold of his hands upon receipt of the letter spread up his arms and into his shoulders.

“It is awful. Winnifred, I do not even want to tell you the contents of this letter, but I know I must.” He placed his hands gently on her shoulders, squeezing lightly. “Winnifred...” His eyes gleamed with tears which spilled over and ran down his cheeks, then disappeared beneath his cravat.

“The letter is written by Elton himself. And he says that it is too late. He says they are dead.”

She already knew what he would say, and yet the word *dead* hit her like a slap directly to the face. She took a step back as her hands flew to her lips, stifling her cry. His grip on her shoulders intensified. She wanted to faint, but feeling his strong fingers dig into her shoulders kept her in the here and now. She clapped onto his forearms, holding herself up with all of her might.

"No... No... Leo. It cannot be true. It cannot be. It has only been hours since the exchange went wrong. They want their money. It cannot be....

"That is not all, Winnie."

She gazed up at him, not understanding what he was trying to say. She heard the words coming out of his mouth, but they made no sense. They were nothing but garbled letters strung together without any meaning.

"Winnie, I wish that the announcement of our siblings' death was the worst that this letter delivered, but there is more." He removed his hands from her shoulders, and she realized he had been holding onto the letter with one hand the entire time. Now he handed it to her, and she stared at it. She took in the words written on thin paper, and it struck her as curious how neat the writing was.

Slowly she took it from Seth's hands and held it up to her face. His writing was like that of a schoolgirl. Neat, meticulous. Each letter crafted as if it were a piece of art.

How curious, that at this moment, I should be reminded of my old governess who stood behind my shoulder and made me repeat the same letters again and again until they looked perfect. This man, Elton, who robbed me of my brother, has the same penmanship.

She blinked, knowing that she was procrastinating. It was as if, as long as she hadn't read the words herself, Leo wasn't gone. However, she knew she could not push away the inevitable any further. With a heavy heart, she read the words written before her. The words she knew would end the world as she knew it.

Your Grace,

I was pleased to receive your letter proclaiming your willingness to arrange another date and time to pay us the money we requested for the release of your sister and Lord Drayton.

I regret to inform you it is too late. We were very clear in our instructions. We were also very clear about what the consequences would be if these instructions were not followed precisely. It matters little on whose orders the authorities were called. At the end of the day, we were left with an empty sack and two mouths to feed without additional funds.

You must understand we could not deprive our nearest and dearest to continue to provide for your sister and Lord Drayton.

I am sorry to say they have been dispatched. If you like, further communication can be sent to arrange for the retrieval of their bodies. That is, should you care to bury the bodies. You did not care enough to retrieve them alive. Otherwise, you would have followed our instructions.

Please give our kindest regards to Miss Keating and her uncle.

She may take pleasure and comfort, knowing that her uncle will one day soon pay for his part in the scheme. His debt is still owed, and we will come collecting.

His plan, it must be said, was sound. If not for the unfortunate turn of events involving the authorities, everybody involved would've gotten what they wanted. You and Miss Keating would've been reunited with your siblings, and Mr. Keating and I would've split the ransom money—as was his plan.

Have I said too much? Were you, Miss Keating, not aware that this was your uncle's plan? That it was his idea to elicit a ransom from His Grace? My dear wife always says, dirty deeds made in the dark one day come to light. But as I said, Mr. Keating's debt will be paid one way or the other.

Please give my warmest regards to Mr. Henderson and his incapable Bow Street Runners. It is always a pleasure to outwit them at every turn.

The letter was signed with his name, Elton. Winnifred stared at the letters as they danced before her.

"My uncle? Am I to understand that my uncle was involved in all of this?" She looked up at Seth, who stood and stared at her stony-faced.

"It seems that way, Winnie. I can see no reason why Elton would implicate your uncle if he were entirely innocent. It does make sense. He asked Leo for money time and again, and Leo refused. And it was he, was it not, who suggested taking money from the business to pay for the ransom?"

Winnifred head nodded up and down slowly in agreement.

Seth is right. This is precisely the kind of thing my uncle would be involved in. Thus far, the family has always paid his debts. Whenever he came calling, my father tended to all of his needs. And Leo carried on the tradition. Until he decided that it was too much, we could not continue to pay for Uncle Ezekiel's poor judgment. It is ironic—it seems we ended up paying the ultimate price anyway.

"That is why he lied to me about knowing Elton. That is why he came here earlier, so distraught about the exchange going wrong. Because he knows that they will still go for him. They may have killed Leo and not received a ransom, but they will come after my uncle and get what he owes them."

She shook her head, mortified at the idea that her uncle would come here for selfish reasons and not because he was genuinely worried about Leo.

"He will not get away with this." Seth said, determination in his voice. "The actions he took are punishable by law. And we will make sure that he answers for his crimes. I will make sure this happens."

Suddenly Winnifred felt a wave of rage overtake her. She raised her head at Seth and narrowed her eyes.

"He will pay. I will make him pay. I will go to Clerkenwell right now, and I will watch them take him away and lock him up. I will

watch him when he realizes that his partner in crime has sold him out.”

She curled her hands into fists, stamping a foot on the marbled floor as her face turned redder and redder.

She knew perfectly well that the feeling of rage was the only thing keeping her from crumbling to the floor with the knowledge that her brother was dead. But she could not think of that. She knew the moment she stopped, the moment she pushed away from the anger, there would be nothing left but misery. She would not be able to do anything, she would not be able to do so much as move. Now, she could not allow herself to think about Leo's fate. First, she had to avenge him.



* * *

Victoria stared up at the canopy above her bed, the special tea containing laudanum on the nightstand by her bed, but she hadn't drunk it yet. She knew the moment she did she would be taken away into a peaceful, soft version of this world where she would not have to think about her brother.

Initially, this was exactly what she craved—an escape. She wouldn't have to consider her actions, she would not have to think about her uncle's cruel words.

Everything would be silent and soft and sweet. But now, Victoria wanted to delay that glorious feeling, for she did not feel she deserved it at all.

I don't even deserve Winnifred's kindness. The kindness I hadn't expected, and if it had come at a less vulnerable time, I might have had to fight her on it, and told her that I could speak for myself and I did not

need my older sister to stand up for me against my uncle. But I am weak. I am the weakest I have ever been. All I could do was stand and allow my uncle to tell me how foolish I have been and how I had ruined everything. Because I know that I have. And then there was Winnifred, defending me. Me. The sister she despised hours ago.

She curled her fingers around her blanket and tucked it closer against her chin. She wanted to hide from the world, and at the same time, she did not. In addition to feeling as though she did not deserve release, she did not wish to be in an altered state of reality when the letter came announcing her brother's fate.

Surely, they would have to hurry. The gang would be eager to make another exchange attempt. They would want the money. And she needed to be clear-headed for this. Not that she would be able to do much—she had been entirely honest when she told her sister she was in no condition to take any actions on her own. Too overwhelming was the sense of guilt she experienced at her role in the undoing of her sister's carefully laid plan.

She wished herself away when suddenly her door flew open, and Winnifred raced in. Her sister's face was red, and her hair stood up on the side of her head.

"Winnie? What has occurred?"

Her sister said nothing. Instead, she handed a letter to Victoria. Her heart sank immediately, for she knew what it was. The answer from the gang leader, Elton. Hurriedly she picked it up and scanned it, and as the words sunk in, she realized the truth, and her heart broke.

"He is dead? No, it cannot be. Not my brother. It has only been hours since Vauxhall Gardens. They cannot mean it. This must be a ruse of some kind."

"There is no reason for them to lie. Leo is gone. At the hands of our uncle! Our uncle, Victoria. We must bring him to justice, and we must do it now. Before our grief overtakes us."

Victoria sat on her bed and stared at the letter, which she had placed on her legs. She shook her head. “No... No, no...”

Winnifred jumped on the bed and shook her hard, so hard Victoria could do nothing but limply raise her head and stare at her sister, who glared at her with determination in her eyes.

“We owe it to Leo to bring our uncle to justice. Come with me to Clerkenwell. I have already called for the carriage. We must confront him.”

Victoria slowly shook her head. “I cannot. I have killed our brother. Without Leo, what is to become of us now? If Uncle Ezekiel is put in jail, then who will take care of us? Who will be there for us?”

“I will. You will be under my protection. That is the least I can do.” Seth’s voice sounded from in the doorway, and Victoria turned in his direction.

He stood, leaning against the door frame, his eyes cast down at the heavily carpeted floor. His stood, mouth slightly opened, and there was a darkness in his countenance that she had never seen before. It was the same expression that she knew marked her face, and would soon take hold of her sister’s as well. But for right now, Winnifred was all anger and rage.

“I cannot accompany you. I...”

Victoria could hold in the grief no longer, tears streamed down her face, and she wept, and the tears soon turned into wails, and before she knew it, she had her head buried in the crook of Winnifred’s shoulder. She clung to her sister; the only person left of the Keating family. She sobbed and sobbed for what felt like hours; her sister did not let go of her. She gently stroked her long hair and rubbed her back until the violent convulsions had turned into whimpers.

When she finally let go of her sister, she glanced at the clock in the corner and saw twenty minutes had passed. Twenty minutes spent doing nothing but cry for her brother and the terrible fate she had

brought down upon him.

In the corner of her eye, she spotted both Mary and Hester standing in the corner where Seth had stood so recently. They, too, were crying.

“Seth has gone to fetch the physician. I think you need a little more than my tincture to help you rest.”

“I do not believe I will ever have a restful night in all of my life again, Winnifred. This is my fault. It’s all my fault.”

Her sister shook her head with vigor. “It is not. It is not your fault. And thanks to this letter we both know whose fault it is. It’s Ezekiel’s, and I am leaving now to bring him to justice.”

With that, Winnifred let go of Victoria and stood up. She was a petite woman, but anyone looking at her now would not have even noticed it at all. Her face was one of determination, but eyes were full of rage, and the pure hatred for their uncle seeped out of every single pore. As Victoria watched her sister leave, she realized she had never been so proud of anyone in all of her life. For her sister would do just as she said. She would bring their uncle to justice—for Leo.

Chapter 25

The moment the coach stopped outside of her uncle's home Winnie threw herself out the door without even waiting for the coachman to assist her. She rushed to the front door and banged the door knocker with such fierceness that one of her uncle's neighbors poked their head out of their entrance to see what the commotion was.

By the time he opened the door, no more than two or three minutes had passed, but to Winnifred, it felt like an eternity. Her uncle looked at her with his hands crossed in front of his chest, blocking the doorway so she could not enter.

"Winnifred. I do not think that we have anything to say to one another at this very moment. Unless there has been news? Have the kidnappers been in touch again?"

"Have they ever!" she shouted. Her uncle's neighbor, an elderly clockmaker, still stood outside of his home and watched the proceedings with great interest.

"Winnifred, lower your voice, do not make such a spectacle of yourself in front of my neighbors. It is rather embarrassing."

She glared at her uncle, when she spoke again, she ensured that her voice was several octaves louder than the previous round.

"If you do not wish to be the center of attention, I strongly suggest that you step aside and allow me entry into the house. Unless you would rather have your entire neighborhood hear that you, Ezekiel Keating, are responsible for the death of your own nephew, and that of the sister of the Duke of Cambarton." She glared at him, her eyes wide and full of raging fire.

He winched immediately and stepped aside, waving her in.

“Winnifred, do not say such outrageous proclamations. What an awful lie to tell. And especially not out in public. Such accusations will ruin my reputation. And they will undoubtedly give you a reputation for being a hysterical woman, and who will want to marry someone like that?”

She stepped into the dark interior of the house and spun on her heels. “I can’t think about marriage. All I care about now is bringing you to justice.”

“You speak like a madwoman. None of what you say makes any sense. The grief over your missing brother must’ve made you fit for Bedlam. Bedlam, I say! I should call for the physician to have you taken there at once and locked away.”

“I assure you, it will not be I who is locked away but you.”

At this, he laughed.” I wish your aunt was here so that she could witness this disgraceful manner in which you address me.”

“So, you deny it?”

“Deny what?” He demanded, his forehead full of deep wrinkles as he stared at her.

“Do you deny that it was your idea to stage this kidnapping and that it was you who approached Elton with the idea to repay your debt and get you both extra funds? Funds you had no right to?”

Her uncle didn’t even have to answer her question, for his reaction gave it all away. He stumbled backward into the wall and then clutched his neck.

“I have done no such thing.” He said it with a voice so weak, so full of guilt, no denial in the world could’ve convinced Winnifred of his innocence. “Why would you say such things?”

“Because your partner in crime has given you away. He has written a letter telling us that it was your idea. And also telling us that Leo and Rose are dead. Dead!” She screamed the last word at him, and his entire body twisted sideways as if she had slapped him. His horror was genuine, that she could easily see.

“Dead? You do not mean it. They did not kill them? Elton assured me no harm would come to them.”

Winnifred sneered. “So you admit it then. It was your idea?”

Her uncle shrunk away and rushed to the end of the hall. She followed him, full of concern that he might attempt to flee. Alas, he did not. He rushed past the dining room and into the kitchen, where the cook looked up from a pile of dough.

“Mrs. Walsh, leave us,” he commanded the woman. The cook dropped the ball of dough she had been shaping onto the countertop and then rushed outside, blinking in confusion at her master’s tone.

“The man is a liar!” Uncle Ezekiel declared.

“Please, do not attempt to defend yourself. You have already been caught out lying to both myself and Victoria. We already know that you owed an outstanding debt to Elton, you admitted it yourself. You admitted borrowing money from them. You have caught yourself in lie after lie. It will not be difficult to demand proof from this gang leader. Besides...” She smirked at him, knowing what she would say next was going to terrify her uncle beyond measure.

“Elton had a message for you in the letter. He said you would pay. Even though your plan fell apart and he did not receive the ransom money which would have covered your debt, he will receive what is his. One way or the other.”

As she predicted, her uncle swallowed, and his lips trembled with sheer terror.

“I do not have the money. He knows I do not have it.”

Winnifred glanced around her uncle’s modest home.

“You may be in the suds. You and Aunt Anna haven’t a sixpence to scratch with, but you have a great many pretty things in his home—pretty things paid for by my father. And by my brother. I predict one of these nights, Mr. Elton will likely come with his men and claim what is his. If not by way of a direct payment, then by a method of indirect compensation. That painting over there should be worth something. Or this golden decanter. Or the chandelier with all of it’s pretty dangling crystals and the expensive beeswax candles.”

Her uncle shook his head. “Never. He would never. And I would never allow him to... These things are mine. They belong to me. Nobody will take them from me. And you will not scare me with your faradiddles. Really, it is quite cruel of you to claim your brother was killed. Just to get me to confess to... What? That I know Elton?”

“I do not mean to trick you. I am telling you the truth. Here, read it for yourself.”

She threw the letter from Elton at her uncle, and he caught it clumsily, crumpling it as he did so. He squinted at the tiny handwriting as he took in the words, and when he was done, his mouth dropped open.

“He cannot mean it. This is not at all what... This is not... Leo? I cannot believe that this is true.”

Winnifred blinked at him. “Do you believe me now? You believe that Elton has killed my brother because of your actions?”

Her uncle glanced at her but said nothing.

Instead, he simply shook his head and furiously rubbed his temples.

When he spoke again, it was with hesitation and confusion. “I cannot believe this...”

“It would behoove you to believe it, what is the reality with which we must now live. Victoria and I must come to terms with the fact that our brother is dead because of you. It was already difficult to accept this when we simply thought that you had brought this calamity down upon us due to your gambling habits. But now that it is written in black and white that the whole ordeal was your idea... I do not know how we should go on. As for you... I suppose all that is left is to wallow in your guilt and to wait for Elton to claim what is his.”

“Winnie, you must believe me, it was never my intention for anything so horrible to happen to Leo. All I wanted was a little money. He could’ve given that to me. But he wouldn’t. He just wouldn’t. And Elton wanted his money. Elton told me before that there would be dire consequences if I did not repay him. So, I had to. I had to come up with something.”

So now he admits it. Now that the proof is in his hand, black and white, he has no choice but to accept it. At least I’ve driven him that far. This is what I needed. His confession was spoken out loud and witnessed—almost.

“And what did you come up with? That he kidnapped my brother? And Lady Rose? Uncle Ezekiel?”

Ezekiel shook his head.

“I had nothing to do with Lady Rose. I told Elton that my nephew was involved in a profitable business and was rather flush. I offered to split the money with him if he could manage to snatch Leo. He was amenable to my suggestion that we extract money from you, by way of the business. He would’ve taken enough to pay my debt, and I would’ve received a small profit. Only thirty percent. But it was with the understanding that no harm would come to Leo.”

Winnifred crossed her arms. “Then how did Lady Rose get caught

up in all of it?"

He shrugged. "To find a good time to snatch up your brother, Elton had me draw up a schedule of how he usually spends his time. He used the schedule to send two of his men to conduct surveillance. In the process of surveillance, they uncovered a little secret relationship with Lady Rose. Something I did not even know about. They then decided blackmail was the better method to get money."

The older man walked through the kitchen and stopped at the window. He glanced outside, and the clicking of horses' hooves drifted through the open window.

"Elton decided that it would be easier to extract the money from Leo by way of blackmailing. His plan was simple. He sent a letter to both Lady Rose and Leo. He did not state any amount, just a meeting place. He wanted them both to present themselves there. He was going to confront them with their secret relationship and tell them that he had enough evidence to make public their affair. The plan was to keep Lady Rose in their custody while Leo retrieved the money. However, when Leo realized that Lady Rose was in danger, evidently he fought with Elton. It was just decided that the original plan, the kidnapping, was the best way forward after all. Elton held both of them captive in St. Giles."

"But why send the letter to you and not me?"

Her uncle looked at her, the bemusement evident on his face as he smirked. "You are a woman. Certainly, they would not be sending you the ransom demand. I am the head of the family, and he sent the letter to me. I was simply supposed to inspire you to use the business money to pay for the ransom. I could not have known that thoughtless, stupid girl was going to go to the Bow Street Runners."

"Do not dare call my sister names. Unlike you, she truly cared about Leo. You are the one who should be ashamed. You are the one who gambled on Leo's life. And you lost. For that, you will be locked up forever."

How uncle shook his head. "Oh, my dear child, I shall not be locked up anywhere. Nothing will happen to me. It is my word against that of a known gang leader. I may not be a nobleman myself, but I am the brother of one and the uncle of one. My word weighs more than his."

"But you just confessed to everything. I heard you."

Her uncle shrugged as he stood with his head toward the window.

"And once again, I must remind you that you are a woman. It seems you have quite forgotten your place in society. My word means more than a gang member's and my word weighs more than a woman's."

"But not more than mine." Seth said as his face appeared at the window, next to that of Mr. Weston.

Uncle Ezekiel's mouth dropped open as he stared at Seth.

"Cambarton?"

"It is Your Grace, to you. And this here is Mr. Weston. An investigator with the Bow Street Runners. And the both of us have heard your confession."

The older man's eyes darted from Winnifred back to the investigator and Seth.

"You have been here this entire time?"

Mr. Weston shrugged. "At first, we were stationed at the front door. You may not have noticed it, but Miss Keating left the door ajar so that we were able to hear your conversation. Then, when you rushed back here, you did us and our investigation a great favor as the window was already open—we heard your confession loud and clear."

“Winnifred, you would not do this to your uncle, would you?” The man said as he faced her, an expression of disbelief written all over his face.

“I would not do what? Bring you to justice for bringing about the murder of my brother? I certainly would. And gladly. I shall sit at your trial and tell them what you told me. I shall beg them for the harshest punishment, for you have destroyed our family.”

“You would not! You would not bring such shame upon our family. And for what? All I have done is suggest something to a gang leader. He is the one who did everything. He is the one who killed Leo. I love Leo. I would never have wished such a fate upon him.”

Seth and the investigator stepped through the kitchen door.

“And that is where you are quite mistaken, Mr. Keating,” Mr. Weston said. “You are the one who set off this chain of events that ended in the death of your nephew. The courts will hold you just as responsible as Elton. And if Elton cannot be caught, then you are the only suspect. Two members of the nobility are dead. Somebody will be held accountable, and if it cannot be Elton, then it will be you.”

“Never! Nobody will ever sentence me. I am the brother of a Baron!”

“And I am a Duke. I am one of the highest-ranking members of the peerage. I am a Peer of the Realm, and I will make sure that you hang for the murder of my sister.”

Seth spoke these words with such venom that Winnifred could not help but shrink back in shock. To hear him express such harsh words caused her a flurry of emotion. At once, she found it comforting to know that his anger was just as deeply felt, just as righteous as hers. But she was horrified by the idea of seeing her uncle hang.

However, that was a concern for another day. Right now, she

simply watched as Mr. Weston grabbed her uncle by the elbow and led him through the dark house and out the front door. Winnifred dashed after them, followed in short order by Seth, and together the two stood on the pavement as Mr. Weston transported her uncle to a black carriage that had been parked outside.

Her uncle's neighbor still stood on the front stoop of his home, but he was no longer the only one. All up and down the street, people had come out of their homes and watched as Ezekiel was taken away for the murder of his nephew.

As the carriage door closed and the horses trotted down the sandy road, all the anger and hatred that had propped Winnifred up these past few hours slipped out of her body, and a wave of desolation crashed down on her.

"Leo," she muttered, "he is dead."

Before she knew it, she spun around and cast her eyes at Seth, who stood before her, his lips pressed together, his eyes glistening with tears.

"Oh, Winnifred, I am so sorry. I wished... Rose, my Rose..."

As the tears streamed down his cheeks once more, Winnifred threw herself into his arms. She held onto him as though he might keep her from drowning, and in turn, he did the same. Together they stood, their bodies at last connected, but there was no joy in it. As they propped each other up, a realization overcame Winnifred. The search for her brother was over. For good.

Chapter 26

“How is she today?” Seth asked as he walked next to Mary toward the garden. A week had passed since the news of their siblings’ deaths devastated their world. Seth had taken it upon himself to take care of the business, as well as Leo’s estate.

“About the same, Your Grace. She finally had a little breakfast, which is more than can be said for Miss Victoria. Poor Hester has been struggling all week to get the girl to eat or even to leave her bed.” Mary shook her head as she led him out into the garden.

“I wish I could say time will heal the wounds, but I know from personal experience that sometimes it does not.”

The maid flashed him a sad smile and nodded before returning to the house. She, like so many of their servants, wore black. Her face wore the obvious signs of grief—sunken, red eyes, a pale, tired appearance—it was a sight that greeted Seth in both his home and Winnifred’s.

He remained standing on the steps leading into the garden for a moment, his eyes lingering on Winnifred, who was seated on a blanket next to a little wooden house in which the outline of several kittens was visible.

Her black and white cat, Bell, sat in Winnie’s lap, and she gently stroked the feline’s fur.

He made his way toward her, careful so as not to startle her or her cat. When he almost reached her blanket, she looked up. It was immediately evident that she spent the night crying. Her eyes were red, and the black circles under them had only deepened. He knew that he looked much the same. However, he’d given up looking in the mirror several days ago. The sight staring back at him was too

haunted.

The young man that looked at him from the confines of the mirror reminded him too much of his former self—the confused, angry man he'd been after David's death.

How odd it was that he should be at the start of another three-month mourning period for a sibling. The memories of the last one remained vivid in his mind. With a shudder, he recalled his brother's body wrapped in a mourning cloak and displayed in the drawing room so those who wished could pay their respects. He'd hoped to never have to go through such a thing again, but a year later, the ritual repeated itself at the passing of his mother, and then his father, a few years after.

And now, he wore black again—for Rose. He was dressed in black pantaloons, paired with a dark gray shirt, black waistcoat, and a matching black tailcoat. Likewise, Winnifred was clad in a black bombazine gown, black silk shawl, and a matching black bonnet and gloves. She raised one hand and waved it in his direction as he approached.

"May I?" He indicated the space beside her. When she nodded, he took his seat, and the cat jumped out of Winnifred's lap and rushed away into the wooden house, where almost immediately the sounds of kittens meowing ensued.

"I am sorry. I didn't mean to make her leave."

"Such is the nature of a cat. How are you, Seth?"

He shook his head. "Miserable. I've passed another sleepless night. I cannot find any rest. Not well, knowing that somewhere out there, Rose's..."

He looked off into the distance as he thought once more of this terrible situation, that had now become his life.

The day after Ezekiel's arrest for his part in the deaths of Rose and Leo, Seth wrote to Elton again, requesting the macabre exchange he had first brought up in his letter—Leo and Rose's earthly remains in exchange for whatever money Elton deemed necessary. It had been a week, and so far, there was no reply.

"I have waited day after day myself," Winnifred said. Her tone was neutral—there was no emotion, not grief, not anger—nothing. For several days, she had spoken this way, as if losing Leo had made her simply numb inside. He had to confess, there was a part of him that was envious, as he seemed to feel every single emotion twice as strong as he usually did.

It is punishing, she helped me tear down these walls I built around me so that I might allow myself to feel again. So that I might allow myself to open up to people. Well, to her, anyhow. And now that my heart is open, I lose my sister. And the pain is immeasurable.

"What pains me most is the senseless causes for Rose's death. She and Leo both died for absolutely nothing," he declared.

"I know it. Because my uncle was greedy and Elton devious. And even Victoria... But we are not without blame. If I had only involved Victoria sooner... Now she will not even speak. Not to me; she will not speak to anybody. She will not leave her chamber. I am terrified of what this will do to her. When we lost our parents, it was dreadful. But we had Leo. He was strong, and he pulled us through. And, of course, my sister was very close to my aunt, but Aunt Anna will not speak to us now either. Not that I would want her to."

Seth took her hand in his as he had so many times this past week. "She will recover. Somehow, she will. As will we. But I cannot pretend that our world will ever be what it once was. Our mere existence has been fundamentally changed. But all we can do is carry on. That is what I learned after losing David..."

He paused for a moment. As he blinked and took in her delicate features, he couldn't help but notice that her collarbone protruded

more than just days ago. The sharp bone on her wrist stood out, and her slender fingers were even thinner than usual.

The only sensation that superseded his grief was the desire to protect her.

“Winnie, I want you to know that everything I said to you about how you have held a place in my heart for so many years, I meant. And I know this is not the time to make such proclamations, but you mean so much to me. Without you, I would not have a reason to get up in the morning. You give me strength. And all I want right now to be here for you, to help you.”

She wrapped her hand around his forearm and gently ran her fingers along the soft skin of his inner arm.

“You do, Seth, you do. I wish we had gotten to know one another better before all of this. I wish I had not made such assumptions about you.”

“And I wish I had not been so determined to keep you at a distance. Not just you, but everybody.”

“I am grateful that you no longer feel that way.”

Their eyes met, and for a wonderful, light instant they were lost in each other. These were the moments that Seth lived for right now. The moments he could spend with Winnifred. And even though neither of them had declared the depth of their feeling, it was clear to him that she was *the one*. In her presence, he felt the weight of his loss lift, even if just for one short second.

For the past week, he had come to call on her almost every day. He'd arrive in the morning, stay throughout the day, each soaking up the other's presence for comfort. Often, they would do nothing but sit out here in the garden, or in the library, each lost in a book. He attempted to get her to eat, but to no avail, and once every afternoon, both of them would venture into Victoria's chamber to call on the younger woman.

Victoria's condition concerned him. She hadn't left her bed since receiving the news of her uncle's confession. The physician called on Victoria daily, and kept her sedated in a dreamy semi-conscious state from which she only escaped when the laudanum wore off, and the reality of what was now her life crashed down upon her again. She'd fall into a fit of despair, requiring more of the precious tincture.

Winnifred had been in a similar state the first couple of days, but thankfully, the now-familiar numbness had taken her over since then.

“—from Mr. Markham?”

“Mr. Markham?” Seth asked, having missed the first part of her question. He found himself daydreaming and escaping into his thoughts more often these days—there was some respite in it.

“I asked if you have spoken to Mr. Markham or Mr. Weston.”

“I have. Mr. Weston has assured me his contact within the Roamers is still working to get information about the whereabouts of...” He could not bring himself to say, *the remains* or *the bodies*. Too painful, too macabre was the description. “I am sure he will let us know as soon as he finds out anything. I wish Elton would tell us how much money he wants. I will pay anything. I would have always paid anything. I always considered material things secondary to love and family.”

She squeezed his hand but said nothing. There was nothing to say. The past couldn't be changed. All they had was the future. And even that was no comfort right now, as they were in a state of purgatory until their family members could be given a proper burial.

A gentle mewling escaped from the wooden cat house where Bell presently fed her kittens. He glanced back and saw one of the kittens, an orange and white one, stumbling out of the little house, its amber-colored eyes open. He reached for the kitten, gently lifted

it, and placed it in his lap.

The innocent, small life in his lap made him smile as he petted him.

“It looks as though you have been adopted,” Winnifred said with a lightness in her tone that pleased him. The animals provided her with relief, and he could now see why.

“That is how I came to be the human Mummy to Bell. She, too, chose me. But not as a kitten. She followed me home one afternoon as I returned from Hyde Park. She followed me the entirety of the way, can you imagine?”

“You are right, it sounds as though she chose you.”

They sat on the blanket for another hour or so, although neither spoke. Winnie lost herself in her book, an Ann Radcliffe novel, while Seth played with the kitten until it fell asleep in his lap.

The silence between them did not bother him. Seth found that these days he did not have much to say. His mind was much too occupied with the events of the past few weeks. He could only imagine what would’ve happened if Mr. Weston had not come to call on him, wishing to inquire about the content of Elton’s letter, just as Winnifred set off toward Clerkenwell. For if Mr. Weston had not been there, Mr. Keating might be free still.

How brave Winnifred had been to confront him as she did. And how much he had wanted to plant a facer on her uncle when he ridiculed her, telling her that the word of a woman did not account for anything. Well, it undoubtedly counted now. For once Keating went on trial, Winnifred would testify against him. And even though she had expressed her wish that he be spared the gallows, Seth intended to make sure the man was at the very least sent away to the colonies.

It wasn’t until the sun sank in the distance, and the world was tinged in a bright orange and pink glow, that Seth rose from his blanket and stretched his legs.

Winnie looked up at him, her eyes wide. “Must you leave already?”

He smiled down at her. “I have been here most of the day. I am afraid I have yet to call on my cousin to give him the news. And I really ought. He is the only family I have left. He may wish to be at the funeral, once we know when that will be.”

Winnifred got up. The kitten had long since made its way back into the warmth of the wooden house where Bell now lay on her side, all four kittens near her.

“That is perhaps for the best. I shall accompany you to the door.”

The two slowly made their way across the garden, and were ascending the narrow stone staircase, when the French doors to the garden flew open and Victoria stormed out. She looked like a mad woman. Her hair cascaded down her back while her gown, a simple black gown with the buttons not all the way done up in the back, blew in the breeze.

The lack of nourishment was evident in her frail frame and sunken cheekbones.

“Winnie!” She called out. The gravely tone in her voice spoke of the many days spent in silence.

“A letter has come!”

Winnie stood frozen and stared at her sister. “Victoria... You haven’t left your bed in days.”

“And I was not going to. But then Hester delivered this letter.” She waved the piece of paper in her hand through the air, creating a whooshing sound as she did.

“And I am ever so glad she did. For it is the notification we have been waiting for.” To Seth’s puzzlement, a smile spread on her lips as she waved the letter.

“From Elton? But...”

“Let me read it to you,” Victoria demanded and beckoned them to come up the stairs. She cleared her throat which only marginally improved her voice.

“Miss Keating,

If you wish to bury your brother, bring the sum of five hundred pounds to the Chinese Pavilion at Vauxhall Gardens. Once the money is deposited, leave. You will receive a notification as to the whereabouts of your brother. If His Grace, the Duke of Cambarton, wishes to have his sister returned to him, the same applies to him. Make the deposit on Saturday, at two in the afternoon.”

Victoria handed the letter to Seth, who frowned. It was not Elton’s handwriting. In fact, it didn’t even look like the handwriting of anyone who knew how to write very well. The letters were sloppy and there were many errors in the writing.

When Seth looked up, he noted the smile on Victoria’s face. What, he wondered, did she have to smile about? Before he could ask, Winnie took the letter from his hand and glanced at it.

“Do you see it?” Victoria asked her sister. Seth drew his eyebrows together and looked from one sister to the other, utterly confused. Suddenly, Winnifred’s entire visage brightened and she stared at Seth, her mouth agape.

“What happened?” he stepped closer toward her and she raised the letter, pointing at something.

“Look. Do you see? The little squiggly lines under some of the letters?”

Seth took the letter and examined it once more. Then, suddenly, his eyes focused in on what the sisters each saw with ease. There were several letters with discreet lines drawn under them. Due to the

sloppiness of the writing, it was hard to see.

With a pounding heart, he made out the secret message within the letter and gasped. There—obscured within the message—was a code:

They live.

Chapter 27

“I do not understand this letter.”

Mr. Markham said it the following day when Winnifred and Seth sat in his office in the early morning hours. He read the letter again and carefully analyzed every single line. Winnie watched as the man’s eyes darted across the lines. Finally, however, he seemed to come to the same conclusion again. Markham shook his head and placed the communication on the table before him.

“I simply do not understand it,” he repeated.

“But it must be true, do you not agree? Surely, our siblings are alive. Why would they have underlined the letters as they did?”

Winnifred’s excitement overwhelmed her voice, and the words came out in a jumble. However, she didn’t care. Even if she sounded hysterical, she had reason to be. The brother she had thought was dead, was alive. At least according to the secret message within this letter.

“Winnie is right. Whoever wrote this letter must have included the secret message. The handwriting is not the same as the first ransom demands.”

Markham leaned back and shook his head.

“We could ask Mr. Weston to reach out to his contact once more.”

“We considered this, too. Weston’s contact is...” Seth trailed off. “Do you suppose it is his contact that sent this letter? I mean, could it be that it was Mr. Weston’s contact that included the secret message?”

"I should think not." Markham shook his head. "I do not know who his contact is, but by Mr. Weston's admission, he's rather mutton-headed, which is why he was able to bribe him into giving him information in the first place. Which is also why the quality of said information is not always reliable."

He picked up the letter again and scrutinized it.

"Does it strike you as curious that the handwriting is different?" Winnifred asked as she played with the hem of her thick gown. The lace scratched against her skin, making her uncomfortable. The air in Mr. Markham's office was always thick and overly warm—she could only imagine what it would be like at the height of summer.

Markham shook his head again. "Not at all. A man like Elton does not often take the time to write his letters. Instead, he will dictate them or instruct one of his underlings on what to write."

Seth nodded to Winnifred. "That is what we also concluded."

Winnifred allowed her eyes to linger on Seth as an immense feeling of gratitude and, yes, love overcame her. Despite his grief, he had taken such good care of her these past few days. Seth called on her each day, passing the endless hours with her. She knew she loved him, and she knew that he felt likewise, but thus far, neither of them had made the grand confession. Too painful was the world that was presently their reality. And yet, without him, she would not have made it through these last few days.

"I suppose..." Markham tapped his index finger against his chin. "I have an idea. It could be that your siblings are indeed alive, and this is all a ruse. But, on the other hand, this could be Elton's way of toying with you. It is entirely possible that he had this letter sent to you with the instructions, and he underlined the letters himself, letting you know that your siblings are alive."

Seth sucked in a large lungful of air before replying. "But why would he do such a thing? Why not immediately tell us that our siblings are alive? Why tell us that they are dead?"

“It was a punishment, wasn’t it?” Winnifred said. “It makes sense, a man like Elton would not like to be toyed with. He went to Vauxhall Gardens fully intending to make the exchange only to be surprised by the authorities. He would be livid about a transgression like that. Even though we made it very clear that it was not our doing.”

A dark shadow spread across Markham’s face.

“You are quite correct, Miss Keating. Elton is well known to have an ill temper, and an event such as what happened at Vauxhall Gardens would incense him. I would not put it past him to tell you that your siblings were dead to send you into utter despair. Then, after letting you suffer for several days, he would reignite your hopes by way of a letter such as this.”

Seth got up from the heavy leather chair, his boots clanging across Mr. Markham’s hardwood floor, and he stopped at the window. He placed one hand flat against the wood-paneled wall and looked outside, his blond hair moving slightly as he shook his head.

“It is one of the theories we spoke about last night, but at least one question remained. Why not simply tell us in this letter that they are alive and demand the same amount he has demanded before?”

He looked over his shoulder. The sun streaming through the window illuminated his face in a way that made him look like one of the figures depicted in the artwork of churches, in the marvelous stained-glass windows.

“I suppose it is a test. If you agree to these terms, he will likely be there at Vauxhall Gardens on Saturday and collect the ransom. If you do what this letter instructs, to the very detail, you will likely be sent another communication telling you that now the trust has been re-established, a fair exchange will be made, freeing your siblings.”

“So you think Elton is banking on us noticing his secret message?”

Markham turned the palms of his hands up. "It doesn't matter one way or the other. Not to Elton. If you didn't see the secret message, you'd pay the money for their remains, and he'd follow up with another demand. If you did, then it would only raise the probability of you making payment. It would be insurance of sorts. If, indeed, Elton was the one who underlined the letters."

"So what is your advice, Mr. Markham? Should we do as the letter demands? Go on Saturday and bring the money and then see what happens? But what is to keep Elton from toying with us endlessly? You said at first that if he made a ransom demand and we paid it, our siblings would be returned. But everything is different now because of the authorities."

Mr. Markham leaned back in his chair, which creaked as his sturdy frame pressed against the back. "That is correct. Had everything gone to plan, he would've simply released your siblings, but as you quite rightly noted, Miss Keating, the code of honor that would have bound him before no longer applies because you did not follow his instructions. He is free to do whatever he pleases. He could endlessly draw this out. I am sure eventually your siblings will be returned, but...."

"You cannot know this, Mr. Markham. He may be toying with us now as it is."

Winnifred looked up at Seth and noted that his face was a shade of red she had never seen before. His hands were curled into fists, and his lips trembled with anger.

"We must beat him at his own game. We cannot continue to follow his instructions in the dim hope that our siblings are alive. We can no longer be simply reacting to his demands. We must take action." Seth turned his head, the look of intensity he cast at Winnifred sent a buzzing all through her body.

"We must take action as we did at the very start of this investigation, Winnie."

“When we each went into St Giles?”

Slowly the grim expression on his face was replaced by a slight smile.

“Indeed. But this time together.”

“Your Grace, no. I must strongly advise you against any such action. Your first attempt at visiting St. Giles was reckless. And I have told you this. And to involve Miss Keating in this....”

“Mr. Markham, I think by now you should know that I might be a lady, but I am not afraid. Not anymore. And especially not with Seth by my side. I trust him. He trusts me. Now we need for you to trust us as well. Please, Mr. Markham, give us whatever information you have on Elton and his gang. Anything at all. We must go there and investigate Leo and Rose’s fate ourselves. We are going to get our siblings back, with your help or without.”

“Miss Keating, you will have my help regardless. I wish to see Lord Drayton and Lady Rose returned with as much intensity as you do. But you are endangering yourselves. Allow me to be quite blunt—you are both easily recognizable as members of high society.” He looked Winnifred up and down, and she followed his gaze.

She wore a silk mourning gown with a matching shawl draped around her shoulders. While the gown was black, it still stood out for its fine material and intricate embroidery. Hundreds of tiny marigolds—the flower of sorrow—were stitched into the fabric. In addition, she wore a black bonnet with a veil made of silk.

Yes, Markham was correct. She looked like a lady of high society amid her mourning period.

As she glanced at Seth, she saw further justification for Markham’s worry. Particularly Seth’s golden cufflinks and the gold pocket watch chain which hung from his navy-blue waistcoat gave away his status, even though he otherwise wore black.

Seth rolled his eyes at Mr. Markham. “Markham, by Jove. Of course we would not venture into St. Giles as we presently are. We may not have your street wisdom, but we are not simpletons. After all, we have uncovered a lot quite on our own without your help. And we shall uncover more.”

The anger in his voice at first surprised her. Mr. Markham had been nothing but helpful and supportive of them throughout this ordeal. But then she understood. Because of her and Victoria, he had to hold in his grief these past few days. While Winnifred sunk into despair, as had her sister and their entire household, Seth remained strong. For them.

But it was all beginning to overwhelm him, as was apparent by his reaction. He had lost just as much as she. His parents were gone, as was his brother, and now his only sister might also be. But, even though she and Victoria were not close, they still had one another. There was a chance that this tragedy could even bring them closer together. Even if Leo was found alive, Seth did not even have that little bit of hope to cling to.

I must take some of this burden off him. He has done so much for me, it is time to repay him. I must take the lead. Indeed, I have become much too reliant upon him throughout this investigation. I was so determined to do everything on my own, but I have done nothing but lean on him these past few days.

She cleared her throat and cast her eyes squarely at the investigator. “Mr. Markham, I can appreciate you only have our well-being in mind. But please, allow us to proceed as we see fit. Please share with us any information you have that might be useful. Surely you must have some ideas.”

“If you are simply unwilling to wait for Saturday, which is my explicit advice, then your only other option is to gain information from Elton’s gang. There are some members who might be willing to share information for the right price.”

“It seems risky, questioning any member of his party. And it seems

Mr. Weston's informant could not gather a lot more information that is helpful to us. Does he not have any friends that might be able to be of assistance?" Winnie asked.

"Family," Seth suddenly said. "In his letter, the one in which he declared our siblings were dead, he spoke of his family."

Winnifred's eyes grew wide as she wrapped her hands around the arms of her chair.

"That is correct. He said he could not keep our siblings alive because he has a family to feed. Perhaps we could speak to them. They may be willing to divulge information to us. What do you know of them?"

Mr. Markham leaned forward and placed his elbows upon his desk, his head resting in his hands. "My Lord, I mean, Your Grace, Miss Keating... If you insist... Very well. Elton has a wife, Frances is her name. They also have a daughter, by the name of Helena, nine or ten years old. It has always been my impression that theirs was not exactly a marriage based on love. As far as I know, Frances was a daughter of Elton's rivals; then, he dismantled their gang, leaving her without protection. However, I do not believe he involves them in his business. If anything, he keeps them far away."

Seth slipped back into the chair beside Winnifred and leaned forward.

"Where do they live? Elton and his family? Surely you know."

Mr. Markham pressed his lips together.

"I do not. Elton owns several properties in St. Giles, and I assume they live at one of them, but I have not needed to find out. Frankly, before your case, I wasn't involved with Elton for almost a year. I had other matters to attend to. I am not sure if his family would be aware of his goings-on, not when it comes to his business."

“That remains to be seen. If they do not know anything, then we’ll have lost nothing, but if they do, we stand to gain everything,” Seth said with conviction.

“Indeed, Mr. Markham. We must take action, and we must do so today. Please.”

The man sighed deeply and shook his head. “I see you are determined. Very well. To find out just where Elton keeps his family, you might be best off asking some of his underlings that are perhaps easier to persuade than others. The flophouse you told me you visited the first time you ventured into St. Giles would be a place to start. But take heed. It is dangerous.”

Winnie glanced at Seth just as a smile spread across his face.

“We know,” she replied, while never taking her eyes off Seth. Finally, they would take back control of this situation. Elton would no longer decide their fate. No, Winnie was resolute. From now on, she and Seth would set the rules. Together.

Chapter 28

Seth stepped outside of Mr. Markham's office, suddenly feeling not anywhere near as bleak as when he entered. He had to admit, despite the arrival of the letter and a mysterious hidden message, he hadn't been quite sure what to believe. It seemed almost too good to be true. A part of him feared it was nothing but a cruel trick of fate, something that in a moment would fall apart. Hearing Mr. Markham's assessment invigorated his fading hopes.

I cannot even explain it, but I feel as though the blood is surging through me faster than ever before. And the thought of going into St. Giles, and doing so with Winnifred by my side, brings me almost a sense of satisfaction. Before, it filled me with anxious anticipation and dread. Now I know there is hope. There is something I can do other than helplessly watch Winnifred and Victoria wither away under the strain of grief. I am refreshed and renewed. This must lead to a positive outcome.

He looked at Winnie beside him, and she, too, had an air of renewed hope around her. There was a slight smile on her red lips, and her eyes, so tired and sad these past few days, sparkled with optimism.

He'd been drawn to her, and yes, he'd even adored her for years. But always from afar. Never had he considered his feelings would turn into something more than a distant admiration. Seth always expected to one day hear of Winnifred's engagement to another man, an inevitable outcome. To think she'd thought of him as he had of her all of these years, and he'd allow his fears to stop their union. He faced her while they waited for their carriage.

"Winnifred, you are a true marvel."

She raised her eyebrows. "I am? And what, pray, makes you say that? Not that I'm not happy to hear it."

“To hear you stand up to Mr. Markham, to assert yourself as you did, it was a sight to see. I do not think a lady ever spoke to Mr. Markham with as much courage as you. He was positively bamboozled. Winnifred, I know we have gone through a great many ups and downs these past few days. None lower than when we thought them lost forever. I want you to know that I wouldn’t have had the strength to come this far without you by my side. You make me feel....”

He broke off, for at that moment his carriage arrived, and Mr. Bradford jumped off the box seat and rushed around the vehicle to open the door to let them enter. Like all of Seth’s servants, Bradford donned black attire in a sign of grief for Lady Rose.

“Home, Your Grace?” Bradford asked as he closed the door.

He nodded. “For now. But I believe we shall venture out again shortly.” He squinted at Winnifred. “Shall I take you back to your home to don different, less conspicuous attire? I know I shall have to do the same.”

She nodded, and thus, he instructed Bradford to take them home. Upon hearing they would soon venture into St. Giles again, the coachman swallowed hard but said nothing. He knew better than to question Seth when it came to these matters.

When the door shut and Seth and Winnifred were alone in the carriage, a sense of awkwardness overcame him. A sense of affection for her had so overcome him he’d planned to make his declaration of love to Winnie once and for all, right there on the pavement. But now they were alone, his courage failed him. The lingering sense of unworthiness he’d carried with him since David’s death never entirely left him.

He cleared his throat and awkwardly tapped the tips of his fingers together to release the anxiety that was building ever more inside of him.

“Winnifred, what I meant to say....”

He knew exactly what he wanted to say. He just could not put it into words. The strain of the past few weeks, the apprehension, and worry robbed him of his ability to express himself. And he was not one who ever had trouble making his thoughts heard. As the one in charge of expanding their business and gathering new clients, his smooth manner of speaking, his clear terms, were essential. And yet, now he sounded rather like a bumbling fool.

To his great relief, she reached out her hand and curled her fingers around his.

“There is no need for you to fret right now. These have been long and strenuous days for the both of us, but I believe I already know what is in your heart. You must not force yourself into making any announcements that perhaps you don’t feel ready to make because....”

Seth shook his head, a blond strand flew into his face.

“I love you. Winnifred, I love you with all of my heart. I have been a fool not to have acknowledged it all of these years. I was trapped in my sorrow, in my grief and self-hatred. Even so, I have admired you almost from the moment I met you. These past few days, if nothing else, have shown me that I was right to feel as I did. I love your beautiful heart. I love your passion and your loyalty. You are all I have dreamed of.”

Before his courage could leave him, Seth leaned forward and cupped her face. And then suddenly, his lips were on hers. For a split second, he feared that she did not wish for him to kiss her because she froze, but then, she raised her hand and gently caressed his hair. Her lips parted as she received his kiss.

He drew her near, holding on to her slender body as they melted into one another. The sensation of her warm lips on his filled him with such joy, such warmth, and such desire, he realized that he had been right all along. Winnifred was the one for him. He had just been too afraid to admit it.

When they finally parted, Winnifred's face was flushed red, but there was a bright smile on her lips.

"Oh, Seth, I love you, too. I felt it for so long, but I never dared to so much as hope you might feel the same."

He chuckled. "I wish I'd known. I have simply been too caught in my past to allow myself to even hope for happiness. I didn't think I deserved it, and I did not think I could manage to love anyone with an open heart because of my fear of being rejected again. I didn't think it was worth opening myself up to the potential of pain. But you've shown me I was wrong. The gift of love is worth the possibility of pain."

Winnifred clutched onto his hands. "You are right, it is. But you need not fear. I'd never leave you. I've dreamt of being with you for so long. I think we've made each other braver and stronger these past few days."

He caressed her cheek with his thumb.

"Yes, you are right. In the darkest moments, I knew I couldn't give up because of you. And now that we have hope again, I am more committed than ever to cast aside my old worries and pain. I want the future to be bright. The world Rose and Leo returns to needs to be one free of secrets and discomfort."

"I feel the same way," she said. She placed a hand over his and rested her face in the palm of his hand.

She closed her eyes, kissed the palm of his hand, and then blinked at him. There was a sudden, mischievous sparkle in her bright eyes. "Can you imagine what Leo and Rose will say? Not only do we know about their secret love affair, but now we have one of our own."

Seth chuckled. "Indeed, we do. However, I do not intend to keep this a secret for very long. I want all the world to know that I love you. I want all of the world to know what you mean to me, and first

and foremost, I must tell Rose. And Leo.” He grew serious again and realized that he had allowed his intense feelings to overwhelm him and distract him from the task at hand. He dropped his hand from her cheek while holding on to her hand with the other. “We must find them first, of course.”

A dark shadow rushed across Winnifred’s face.

“Deep within my heart, I cannot deny I dread that we have given ourselves false hope. That perhaps this was just a cruel joke. It is almost as if it is too wonderful a turn of events. There’s this sense of foreboding I can’t shake.”

“I know it. It is as though we have been cast into the depths of despair and ripped out again on a wave of hope. And now I fear we will crash to shore and find ourselves buried in grief again. But we cannot think such negative thoughts. We must consider all the possibilities, of course, but believe me when I say, everything points to them being alive. It is the only thing that makes sense. As we said from the beginning, the purpose of the abduction was to make money. Killing our siblings would not achieve that goal.”

They remained silent for a little while as the carriage barreled on toward home. As they passed St. James’s church, she turned to him again.

“I am apprehensive about revisiting St. Giles, but we must go, and today. We cannot wait. Leo and Rose have been in their clutches too long. Shall I await your return in an hour?”

“Yes, it will not take me long to find suitable attire. We must make sure we are not so easily noticeable. ‘pon my honor, last time we went, I thought we’d surely be robbed, for it was so very evident we did not belong.”

He smiled as he recalled that day.

How peculiar it is, that day seems so very long ago, almost as though it was another life. I thought her a distraction then, and now she is one of

the reasons for carrying on. How I have changed in those past few days. I dare say I would not recognize myself anymore.

As they stopped outside of Winnifred's home, she tightened her grip on his hand.

"We will solve this mystery. And maybe even today."

Touched by her certainty, he smiled and slid across the seat toward her.

"We will."

The twinkle reappeared in her eye. "If all goes well, perhaps we shall have to open our own investigation firm to rival Mr. Markham's."

A roaring laugh shook Seth at the mere idea of it. The lightness between them was dizzying, for he'd not experienced anything like it before. And certainly not in the past few days.

"I am sure Mr. Markham would beg us to join forces to avoid such fierce competition."

Her eyes lingered on his face for some while, but much too soon, she withdrew her hand. "I must go," she said quietly. "But I will see you very soon."

"You shall." He stepped past her so he could assist her out of the carriage.

As her hand settled into his and he escorted her out, Seth realized something. This was the closest he'd been to happiness in years. No. Ever. The return of his sister and best friend would truly complete his life.

Chapter 29

“I dare say, you look better in my gown than I do,” Mary said with a smile as she watched Winnifred examine herself in front of the mirror.

She wore one of Mary’s flowered muslin round gowns, with a thin wool shawl draped around her shoulders. In place of her bonnet, she wore Mary’s cap, a simple white design with only one flower for adornment. She swayed from side to side as she inspected herself to make sure she could pass for a commoner.

“Do you suppose I will stand out in St. Giles, looking like this?”

Mary was about to answer, when Victoria’s face appeared in the door frame. She was still in her black mourning attire. Winnifred and Victoria had agreed that, for the time being, it would be for the best not to take anyone other than Hester and Mary into their confidence.

For one, should the worst come to pass and Leo and Rose were not, as expected, still alive, they would have to plunge the servants into renewed grief.

And for another, one could never know whom one could trust. If too many people knew there was hope again, it might dash the chance of a safe return for Leo. Thus, Victoria kept to her chamber. It was there, in the privacy of their rooms, Winnie told her earlier that afternoon of their plan to go to St. Giles again. Now, it seemed, Victoria wanted to see just how Winnie intended to pass for anything other than a high society lady. And what she saw did not meet with approval. It was clear from the frown on her forehead.

“You are missing something.”

"Is that so, Miss Victoria?" Mary asked. Some of the old hostility still lingered in her voice. While Winnie and Victoria were cordial these past few days, their old disagreements remained unresolved, and Mary would always be loyal to Winnifred, first and foremost.

However, in this case, Victoria did not respond with her usual ire. Instead, she simply smiled and nodded at the maid.

"I am not in the habit of venturing out into the rookery like my sister, but I know enough from the few times my mother took me to the orphanage to know that people who live in poverty do not have access to the things we do. They do not have wash balls and basins available, nor do they have footmen to carry up hot water and tubs. Thus, to go undetected, Winnifred needs to look less..." She looked her sister up and down and then crossed her arms in front of her chest. "Clean."

To Winnifred's surprise, Mary tilted her head to one side and examined her before nodding.

"You know, Miss Winnifred, your sister is not wrong in the least. You may be dressed in simple attire, but your face speaks of all of your nice powders and tinctures."

"And your hair. You wear your hair like a high society lady. I don't think the women who are forced to spend their lives in the hell that is St. Giles have much of an occasion to pin up their hair and adorn it with flowers. Come," Victoria stepped into the chamber and pointed to the chair by the window.

"Mary, would you bring me some of my sister's pots? And a comb? We will make you look like a pauper yet." She smiled. Victoria, Winnie noted, was a changed lady. Gone was the devastation and despair. In their place was the joyful, cheery young woman she could at times be when her ill temperament did not get the best of her. There was no doubt about the matter in her mind—Leo and Rose were alive.

As Winnie took a seat and Victoria stepped behind her, the younger

woman smiled. "Do you suppose His Grace will still like you if you look like a chimney sweep?"

"Faith, our Miss Winnifred don't look like no climbing boy I've ever seen. What are you speaking of, Miss Victoria?"

"You'll see," Vicky chuckled. "Mary, would you take the comb and make sure my sister's hair is in proper disarray?"

Footsteps halted outside her chamber, and when she looked over her shoulder and saw Mr. Purvis standing there with an expression of utter disapproval on his visage, she realized they'd been too raucous and too cheerful. They were meant to be in mourning.

Swiftly, Mary turned on her heels and close the door, saving them from the curious glances of the butler.

Victoria wasted no time. She quickly opened the various pots and patch boxes containing Winnie's cosmetics, salves, and potions. She dabbed rouge on Winnie's cheeks with such vigor, Winnie questioned her sister's method. Upon receiving the critique, Vicky laughed.

"It is to make you look like you work outside a lot. You are much too pale to pass for a proper pauper. And now this...To make you a proper chimney sweep." She opened the small patch box containing lamp-black soot and mixed it with one swift motion with some oil. Using a powder puff, she liberally applied the powder to her sister's face and arms and then, to Mary's utter horror, dabbed a few spots on the gown as well.

"Heaven Forwent! Miss Victoria. My gown! I intended to wear it again," Mary's eyes stood wide as she took in the damage to her clothing.

"Do not fret," Winnie quickly said. "We will have it cleaned."

"My dear, I know you do not understand much about household

chores, but stains such as these will not come out.”

Winnie swallowed; guilt flooded her. “If it does not come out, then Victoria will gladly buy you a new one, a better one, even. And a shawl and matching bonnet.”

“Winnifred, I agreed to no such thing,” Victoria protested.

“Perhaps in future, ask permission before soiling another person’s attire. It is one thing to make me look...as you’ve made me look, but the gown is another matter. Now, do not be such a nipcheese.”

She braced herself for a verbal assault from her sister, but none came. Instead, she shrugged.

“Very well. Mary does need some assistance when it comes to her clothing anyhow. I have long pitied your sense of style, Mary. I shall buy you a gown that is not hideous.”

The corners of Winnie’s mouth twitched. This was as graceful a concession as her sister was willing to make, she knew. Beside her, even Mary could not help but smirk. Undeterred, Victoria turned her attention back to the powder and liberally applied several dabs under Winnie’s eyes to give her the appearance of deep, dark circles.

“There. You are done. A pauper through and through.”

“My, Miss Winnifred,” Mary said as she shook her head, her countenance full of amusement. “I wouldn’t know you if I saw you in the street.”

“Good,” Victoria said with a bright smile. “That was my intention. I dare say even our own brother would not recognize you. If you come upon him today, you shall have to announce yourself first, lest he thinks some stranger has come to rescue him.”

Winnifred’s heart swelled at her sister’s cheerful demeanor. What a

change it was to see her so happy. Winnie could only pray that yet another horrifying discovery did not strike down her optimism.

She walked past her sister and friend to the mirror and gasped. The woman before her looked nothing like Winnifred. This woman, dirty and disheveled, with knotted hair and stained clothing, would not stand out in St. Giles.

Getting from her front door to the carriage without rousing the attention of their neighbors was another matter. She'd surely be in *on-dits* if anyone saw and recognized her—but that was a worry for another day.

Today, she smiled at herself for, yes, this would certainly do. Nobody would suspect her of being a high-born lady looking as she did.

Suddenly, she thought of Seth and what he might think when he saw her. She did not have to suffer from her anticipation for long, for just then, Purvis announced the arrival of Seth's carriage. After one last look in the mirror, Winnie rushed down the hall and out the door—and toward her brother's rescue.

Chapter 30

Seth chuckled every time he looked at Winnifred during the journey to St. Giles. He'd made every effort to pass himself off as a commoner and resident of St. Giles. Well, at least he thought he had, until Winnifred entered the carriage.

"Seth, must you chuckle at me with such abandon?"

"I am sorry to say, but yes. If the circumstances of our journey were not as serious as they are, I confess I would laugh even more. You look a sight. Utterly adorable, but what a sight."

"It was all Victoria's doing. Mary and I had picked out the gown and a shawl, but Victoria insisted I was entirely too clean-looking."

The smile faded from Seth's face as he considered this. "It is rather sad, is it not, that there are people who live in such squalor that we must dirty ourselves up to look like them."

"Indeed, I agree. My mother always raised me and my siblings to be charitable, and you know how much of our annual income Leo likes to donate to the Foundling's Hospital and The Asylum. But sometimes, we forget that others could also need our help. St. Giles has always scared me. And I never considered the people who live there."

Seth nodded slowly. "You are quite correct. I find that our fellow lords and ladies are quick to assist children or the ill amongst our society. But those living as they do in St. Giles, those in the poorhouses, are often overlooked. And I must include myself amongst those who have failed them."

Winnifred reached out her hand to him. "Maybe one day soon we will be able to effect some good in those areas as well. What do you

say?”

Seth smiled, not at all surprised by the suggestion. “Yes, I think so. However, in the meantime, I really must thank your sister for this attire of yours. For it surely cheered me.”

Seth looked down at himself. He was wearing a pair of trousers loaned to him by Mr. Bradford. He’d been obliged to fill the coachman in on their secret, given that he was already suspicious due to the journey first to Mr. Markham’s, and then into St Giles.

Seth thought it prudent that at least the driver knew the actual reason for their journeys. The delight on Bradford’s face at being told that there was a large likelihood that Lady Rose was alive after all had delighted Seth. Seeing how his servants reacted to his sister’s perceived passing was heartbreaking. He never realized just how loved Rose was amongst their servants. Everywhere he went, he encountered maids and footmen, the butler, housekeepers, and stable staff, all with red eyes or tears running down their cheeks.

Upon hearing the news, Bradford had immediately offered to assist Seth in turning himself from a peer of the realm into a citizen of the streets of St. Giles.

To that end, he now wore a simple shirt, Bradford’s black trousers, and a jacket that was too loose for him, that he would ordinarily not even have worn. There was one item, however, that he kept on him for it was essential—he patted his jacket pocket and felt the pouch full of gold coins.

The putrid smell of sewer and decay that always hovered around St. Giles wafted into his nose, and he shivered. Even though the carriage doors and windows were closed, there was no escaping the stench. Beside him, Winnifred retrieved an old, battered fan from a worn reticule and fanned air between them. It helped only marginally.

“I did not remember it smelling so bad the last time we were here. I mean, I know it smelled, for even the maid who washed my gown

commented on the difficulty of removing the stench. But I did not remember it being quite as bad.”

“I believe we were both too consumed with fear last time to notice anything other than what was our objective. I am hoping once we reach our destination, we will once again be too occupied to notice the poverty and the decay all around us.”

Up ahead, St. Giles in the Field Church appeared, and Bradford took the carriage down a small alley. He’d left the carriage there last time and found it reasonably safe. However, like everything else in St. Giles, the alley hadn’t escaped the curse of poverty.

As Seth helped Winnie exit the carriage, she craned her neck to make out the houses before them. A window was broken, and an old newspaper had been placed on top of it to keep the glass from shattering. Another window on another home was entirely gone and in its place was a bedsheet. In the distance, a small figure slept huddled underneath a blanket. It was impossible to make out if it was male or female, adult or child.

The pain at seeing the state of this neighborhood was written all across Winnifred’s face, and silently, he took her hand and pulled her toward the main street. The site was not a great deal more pleasant there, but it was not as bad as it had been in the alley.

He stopped because right in front of them was the flophouse he and Winnifred had made their way into so very recently. It looked the same. Calm and quiet. He noted the front door was painted in a bright green and couldn’t quite recall if it was that way last time they were here or not. He shrugged. It did not matter.

“Are you ready?”

“I am. Although what exactly are we going to do?” Winnie looked up at him, her face a question.

He hesitated. He had been so determined to get to St. Giles and start investigating so they could find Elton’s family, they hadn’t

spoken about the details at all. His mind had been in such a blur, and his heart in such an uproar due to the recent developments.

“I think we should knock on the door. See if whoever is there is willing to give us any information. I will pretend to be your husband, and we will tell them that you are ill. And that we are in desperate need of speaking to Elton. Regarding a loan.”

“And I will tell him that I conversed with Elton’s wife not long ago, and she assured me her husband would be able to help. Then we can request to know just where they live.”

Seth nodded, his lips pressed together. He was entirely convinced that it was a simple, yet effective plan.

It wasn’t until they approached the green door that his own words echoed back in his mind. Had he not confessed to Mr. Markham that he and Winnie didn’t have street smarts? Yes, he had.

Was this really a good idea? He considered Winnie. What if he was putting her in danger? Perhaps they should have...

“Seth,” Winnifred called out through clenched teeth, and then, before he could stop her, she banged on the green door. Together they stood and waited with bated breath for the door to open.

When the door handle jiggled, and the door swung open with an enormous creaking sound, Seth sucked in air. This was it. There was no going back now.

“Yes?”

A tall, burly man with a substantial stomach sticking out so far, his white shirt was stretched to its utmost limit, opened the door. Seth noticed that the man’s white stomach and dark hair poked out between the buttons. He swallowed and withdrew his eyes instead of focusing on the man’s face.

A beard covered the lower portion of his face leaving only his dark blue eyes exposed.

“Hello, we have come to call on....” To his surprise, Winnifred elbowed him in the ribs, stopping his flow of words. He stared at her, not quite sure why she had done so, but when she spoke, he understood.

“Elton, we’re after Elton. Do ye know where he is at? We have been lookin’ all over. ‘pon my honor, if this ain’t the place, then I don’t know what we’re to do. Mary from the Hare and Fox Tavern sent us this way. She sent us wrong?”

The man blinked and examined the two before him with confusion. Seth could not blame him as Winnie had spoken with a rather broad accent Seth could not quite place. However, it seemed to work.

“Mary? The ginger broad?” The man asked.

Winnifred nodded. “That’s the one. So, she wrong? Elton ain’t here?”

The man rolled his eyes. “People ought to mind their own business. Elton does not come here. Never does. Beneath his touch, this humble abode is. Why are you after him anyway?”

“I suppose you had better ask my husband that. It is not a woman’s place.”

She averted her eyes and looked humbly at the dirty pavement below her. To hear her speak in such a manner was such a stark contrast to the confidence she displayed in Markham’s office. However, he knew that this was the only way to get information, for he was sure she recognized the man by now.

It was the same man who had sat in the kitchen talking to his compatriot the first time they were here.

Seth cleared his throat and attempted his very best to sound like Winnie.

“Me ole lady here has taken ill. She don’t seem it now but trust me; she’s in a bad way. The thing is, I ain’t got sixpence to scratch with, and we heard Elton was the one to speak to.”

The man blinked.

“I spoke to his wife Frances some while ago, and she surely told me her husband could help a poor woman out of a spot of bother. That ain’t true?”

The man finally cleared his throat, and when he did, he broke into laughter.

“The two of you are mighty entertaining. Morris, come ‘ere. We have a couple of court jesters on our hands.”

Seth swallowed and grabbed Winnie’s hand. Their ruse didn’t work. The man didn’t believe them. When a second man appeared behind him, Seth recognized him at once. It was Peter, the other fellow who was here the first time they visited the establishment.

“What’s this rumpus about?” The other man poked his head out and looked at the two before them. Seth’s feet twitched with a desire to run away, but he stayed steady because, beside him, Winnie made no motion to leave. She stood firm, and thus, so did he.

Peter tilted his head and squinted, and then, a smile appeared on his face.

“Your Grace, you look rather peculiar. Are you attempting to fit in with us commoners? It ain’t working.”

“I thought that was him. See Morris, I ain’t no simpleton.”

Peter raised an eyebrow at his compatriot, and Seth recalled their

uneasy banter from the last time. These two were not friends, but if he remembered correctly, they were not exactly the worst of the bunch, either.

“And you must be Miss Keating then,” Morris said with a grin as he took in Winnie. “You could have fit right in at Elton’s flophouse. He likes them commonplace girls after all, and handsome enough you surely are. Looking for employment to pay the ransom?”

Seth took a step toward Winnifred as if to shield her from this verbal assault, but he found she didn’t need it.

“How do you know us?” she demanded. Peter shook his head.

“You think all we do is sit in this here hovel all day? No. We were at Vauxhall Gardens, and you surely got yourself in the suds there.”

Seth glanced past them into the house. “So then, you know why we are here. We want to speak to Elton directly about the release of our siblings.”

Morris frowned. “Ain’t he made arrangements already? Peter, ain’t we gonna go to Vauxhall Gardens to get rid of them aristocrats finally? They’ve been doing my head in with their constant whining anyhow. I’m just glad I don’t have to see ‘em this week.”

Seth’s heartbeat sped up. So, they were alive. They’d been correct. Beside him, Winnie squeezed his hand at this realization.

“Where are our siblings?” She demanded. To her shock, Peter shoved Morris with such force, the man stumbled backward and crashed into some furniture out of their line of sight.

“Gadzooks, Morris, you insufferable puff guts. Elton will have your head for this.”

A mumble sounded from Morris, but Seth couldn’t make out the words.

“Where are our siblings?” Seth repeated Winnie’s question. The man’s head spun around, and he glowered at Seth. “I ain’t telling you a thing. Do you think I’m stupid? No. Elton provides my bread and butter, without him, I ain’t got nothing.’

Seth’s fingers curled around the little pouch in his pocket that contained his gold coins. He considered the man before him. Would he perhaps be susceptible to a bribe? He was sure Morris would be, but Peter?

“Can you at least tell us where we can find Elton? Please? Where does he live?”

Peter’s eyes grew wide at Winnifred’s question. “Lady, you must think me a goose cap. If I tell you that, I’d have to run for my life. I could never show my face here in St. Giles again. Nor anywhere in London.”

Seth swallowed.

“And this, I take it, would be a bad thing for you?”

Peter turned his head. “What’re ye trying to say?”

“I mean, leaving London and getting away from this life. Would that be a bad thing? If you could go anywhere, start over?”

Peter blinked and stepped out into the street. He shut the door behind him where Morris’ feet were visible on the floor.

“I take it ye got a proposition for me?”

Seth let go of Winnifred’s hand and nodded.

“I do. How much would it take to leave London and start fresh?”

Peter shrugged. “How much you got? I can see you fiddling with your pocket.”

Seth swallowed and reproached himself for having been so overt. Having no other choice, he pulled out the pouch and handed it to Peter. He peeked inside and shook his head as a grin appeared on his face.

“This will do me nicely, Your Grace.” He glanced behind himself and shut the door all the way.

“Well, what exactly do you want in exchange?”

He bounced the pouch up and down in his hand, but it was already clear that no matter what, he would not give it back.

“We want to know where our siblings are.”

Peter shrugged. “Can’t help you there, Your Grace. Elton had us bring them down to Vauxhall Gardens the day you were supposed to exchange them, but we took them right back in the coach we had ‘em in since you all didn’t follow his instructions. He stashed them somewhere else after that, don’t know where.”

“So, they are alive. Yes?” Winnie demanded with urgency.

“Course they are. Ye think Elton is daft? He was playing with you, letting you suffer a bit before offering another exchange. That little exchange for their ‘remains’ is a test. Ye are a bit bird-witted, ain’t you?”

Seth glanced at Winnie, who smiled. They were not going to tell this man that they’d figured all of this out already.

“Well, be that as it may,” Winnie said. “If you don’t know where they are, then we’d like to talk to Elton. Where does he live?”

The man stepped from one foot to the other and shook his head. “I don’t know if I ought to tell you. You ain’t going to get in anyhow. Besides’ he ain’t there now.”

Seth smiled to himself. This was perfect. If he wasn't there, they'd have the chance to speak to his family and beg for their help.

"We just want to know where he lives. We'll wait there for him," Winnie said quickly. "Doesn't matter to us if he is there."

Seth glanced down at the pouch, and the man shrugged. "Very well, come on then." To their surprise, he spun and headed down the road. When he reached the corner, he looked over his shoulder and waved at them. "Hurry. If you want to know, follow me. I ain't got all day. I got a coach to catch."

Seth grabbed Winnie's hand, and together, they rushed after the man, one step closer to discovering their siblings' whereabouts.

Chapter 31

A size too small for Winnie, the shoes ached as she hurriedly followed this man, Peter, down the dirty streets of St. Giles. A blister formed on her heel and another underneath her big toe. She didn't have to take the shoe off to feel it.

But surprisingly, Winnifred didn't even feel any pain. It was mildly uncomfortable, but the excitement of knowing that their siblings were alive and that they were about to come up to Elton's home pushed away any other sensation.

The entire time she rushed after Peter, Seth was by her side, and their hands remained connected. She noticed that the homes they passed were gradually becoming less decrepit by the time they stopped in front of a small cottage at the very edge of St. Giles. She realized this was a much pleasanter neighborhood.

Peter stopped a few steps away from the front door and turned to them.

"This is it. This is where the Almighty Elton lives. But as I told you, he ain't here."

"It's not Elton we are after anyway," Winnifred said. Seth's eyes grew wide with shock as she gave away this secret. She didn't think it mattered. This man was not going to stick around anyhow. He was going to run the very moment Seth and Winnifred made their way inside. It shouldn't have surprised her, but the lack of loyalty still struck her as peculiar.

"I see. It's Frances you're after, ain't it? Well, good luck with that. She ain't gonna talk to you either. Even if she does, she doesn't know anything." He pursed his lips as he glanced at the front door.

“There’s a guard, of course, so how yer gonna get inside, I don’t know. So, it ain’t like you can just stroll inside and post your questions.”

“Well, I think that pouch you’ve pocketed contains enough to buy your assistance with this matter.”

Seth crossed his arms in front of his chest and raised his eyebrows at the man.

Peter grumbled, but nodded. “I suppose. There’s enough in this little pouch to get me all the way to where I want to go and pay my way for a couple of years. I suppose I can get you in the house.”

He turned and stalked toward the front door. With his hands curled into a fist, he banged on the door until it flew open, and another man stuck his head out.

“Just you?” Peter asked.

The other man nodded and then glanced at Seth and Winnifred.

“Boss had everybody meet down at the tavern to discuss Saturday. Who are they? Why have you brought them here?”

Peter motioned to Winnifred. “This is an old friend of Frances’. She is coming to town ‘specially to call on her. I thought it might be nice, given how Frances never gets to go out. And this fellow is her husband. Ye won’t be opposed to letting them step in and having a word with the missus, would ye?”

“Peter, you sauce box. You know I can’t be letting anybody in here. The boss will have my head.”

Peter shook his head. “What the boss doesn’t know won’t hurt him. Besides,” he stuck his hand in his pocket and retrieved several gold coins. “I’ll make it worth your while.”

Winnifred's mouth dropped open, as she was not quite sure if this would work. Undoubtedly not everybody in Elton's gang was easily bribed...

"Very well. But if the boss finds out, you better bet, I'm going to point fingers at you."

Peter shrugged. "Point all you want. I don't care." He signaled with his index finger for Winnifred and Seth to come forth. When they did, he licked his lips and patted his pocket once again.

"Well, I thank you again for the contribution, and I wish you well."

With that, he rushed away before either Winnifred or Seth could say anything else. They looked at the other man who glared at them. He was a tall, burly fellow with a shock of red hair. His accent was unmistakably Irish. He eyed them both and shook his head.

"Well, then. Step inside."

He pushed the door open, revealing a long, dark hallway. "You wouldn't know when Elton might be back, would you?" Winnifred asked.

The man shrugged. "He won't be back till evening. But don't you be long. You never know. And I'm not going to come to your rescue if he shows up early and is upset at finding you there."

He all but shoved the two of them inside and then shut the door. Suddenly cast in darkness, Winnifred reached for Seth, who clasped his hand around hers. To the right was a door, and Seth gingerly opened it. The room was brighter than the hallway, but the heavy curtains that had been drawn in front of the window kept the sunlight from streaming in. Still, Winnifred could make out a formal drawing room, and beyond it, a dining room. Both looked as though they were hardly ever used, if at all.

"Come this way," Seth indicated forward to a door at the end of the

hall. Underneath the door, light streamed out.

Winnifred charged forth, followed closely by Seth, and when they reached the door, she placed her hand gingerly on the door handle and pushed down. They braced themselves, each taking a deep breath before Winnifred pushed the door open. Immediately, the brightness of the room hurt her eyes, and she had to squeeze them shut for a moment to protect herself from the glare.

When she opened her eyes again, the figure of a woman appeared before her. Auburn-colored hair was piled on top of her head, and she wore a simple white gown, a pretty lace overskirt, and a rose-colored shawl. She stood and stared at Winnifred with her terrified eyes wide open and her mouth open. The fine lines around her eyes indicated her age.

“Who are you? What are you doing in my home?” The shrillness of her tone made her feel almost sorry for the woman. Winnifred stepped forward and indicated for Seth to wait. She raised one hand to calm the woman.

“My name is Winnifred Keating. I’ve come here looking for my brother, Leo.”

The room was bright and spacious, with French windows looking out over a garden. A crystal chandelier hung down in the middle of the room, and a beautiful fireplace sat at the end of the room. The furniture looked expensive, all of it mahogany. A white chaise was adorned with golden trimming. It was this chaise the woman had sat on. It was clear to see from the satin pillow that lay on the floor before her and the spilled cup of tea on the side table.

The sound of another person gasping drew her attention to a figure in the back of the room. Peeking out from behind the pillar in the back of the room, was the face of a young girl. Her eyes were large and curious but not frightened.

Winnifred smiled at her. “Well, hello there.”

The woman took one step to the side to place herself in front of the child, blocking her from Winnie's view.

"I will ask you again. Who are you? Why are you in my home?"

"Ma'am, please do not let our sudden appearance frighten you too much. We mean you no harm. We have simply come to ask questions. My name is Seth."

"Are you the Duke?" The little girl's voice sounded again.

"Helena, please." The woman hissed through clenched teeth, but it was evident to Winnifred that she was not necessarily afraid of Winnifred and Seth. It was evident by the way she continued to stare at the door, as though she expected others to rush through.

"I am the Duke. The Duke of Cambarton. I take it you've heard of me."

Much to her mother's horror, the little girl slipped out from behind the pillar. She wore a lovely sky-blue gown that matched her mother's in style, except that hers was embroidered with little yellow sunflowers.

"Frances," Winnifred said. She read in one of her novels that it was a good idea to address another person by their first name, to make it apparent there were no ill feelings.

"We do mean you no harm. Your husband, well, you know what kind of business he is engaged in. And it is his business we have come to talk to you about." She glanced at her daughter, not wanting to make it too clear just why they were here. Just in case the little girl did not know what her father was engaged in.

Helena made her way towards her mother's side and slipped her small hand into the older woman's. The girl had to be about ten years old, her pale, round face looked far less fearful than her mother's, and her large brown eyes sparkle with curiosity.

“You are Lady Rose’s brother, and you are Leo’s sister.”

Her mother gasped and stared from one to the other. “You are?”

Winnie stared at Seth, who stood open-mouthed.

“Yes, we are.” His tone carried both shock and relief at this.

The confusion on the woman’s face was evident, and suddenly Winnie realized just why she was so puzzled. Winnifred had wholly forgotten that she was still in her disguise.

“This is not our usual attire,” she explained. “We came to St. Giles hoping to find out where our siblings are, and we decided to....”

“You decided to dress the part. I can see that.” The woman’s countenance changed at once from almost frightened to friendly.

“So, you know our siblings? You have seen them?” Winnie asked, the eagerness evident in every word.

The woman shook her head. “I have not. My daughter has, just once and quite by chance.”

Helena looked up at Winnie. “I was with my father last week. Sometimes he lets me go outside for walks with him. We had to go to one of his businesses because there was trouble, and that is where I saw your sister.” She looked at Seth. “She has the same eyes as you. She is so nice. Leo was there too, but I didn’t talk to him because he was in another room. Rose told me.”

The girl pressed her lips together and looked down at the floor. “I don’t think I was supposed to talk to her, but she looked so sad that I wanted to cheer her. I talk to her for a while, and she told me that my Papa was keeping her there even though she didn’t want to stay. She asked if I could help her. I told her that I couldn’t because my Papa usually keeps us here, too, and I’m not allowed to go anywhere on my own, either. Nor do I get to talk to anyone else.”

“What do you mean, he keeps you here?” Seth looked from the little girl to her mother and then to Winnifred. Frances cleared her throat and wrapped her arm closer around her daughter.

“It is true. We are prisoners here, just like your siblings. You must understand, I married my husband because I had to, not by choice. And while we have this comfortable home, we are not allowed to go outside. Sometimes he will take Helena, but I have not been outside for more than a year.”

Winnie’s heart broke for this woman. How awful to marry a man like Elton against her will and then be mistreated in such a horrible fashion.

Something else occurred to her then. “When was it you saw Rose?”

“Just about two days ago,” Helena said. Winnie smiled, further convinced Leo and Rose were alive. She turned her attention back to Frances.

“I suppose you do not know where our siblings are right now?”

“My husband does not share his business details with me. I only know the things we overhear when the guard talks. You are fortunate that there is only one right now. Usually, they are two. I have overheard them speaking about your siblings. They are being moved almost daily from one of my husband’s holdings to another. I could not tell you where they are now.”

The little girl looked up at Winnifred, a smile on her face. “You found my letter, didn’t you? That is why you are here?”

Winnifred looked at Seth, who in turn approached Helena. “Your letter?”

She nodded eagerly. “Well, I suppose it was not my letter. One of the guards left a note on the kitchen table here. He was supposed to deliver it, I think. But he got diverted by somebody at the door. I

was bored, so I decided to read it. It was the same day I saw your sister, so I knew what was in the letter was wrong. So I decided to send you a message.”

“Helena. You know you should not do things like that. It is very dangerous. If your father ever found out....”

“But Mummy. I couldn’t let Lady Rose’s brother and Leo’s sister think they were dead when they’re not. It’s not right. What Papa does is not right.”

Winnifred’s hand traveled to her throat. How could this precious little child and this fearful woman be the family of this awful man Elton?

“Pray, how did you make your way into the building?” Frances asked.

“I wish I could say that I valiantly fought my way past the guards, but I’m afraid it was just old-fashioned bribery.”

“Do you think that same old-fashion bribery could get us out with you? As I’ve said, I haven’t set foot outside for more than a year, and I am desperate to escape my husband’s clutches. Please, Your Grace, take us from this place. Please do not make us remain here.”

Seth swallowed hard, but Winnifred already knew what his answer would be. He would not allow this poor woman and her child to linger here.

For while the room was beautiful, the adornments on the walls were precious, and the furniture of the highest quality, it was easy to see that both mother and daughter were miserable—and scared.

“Please, Your Grace, take us with you,” Helena begged.

“There isn’t much I can give you in return, only the things that we have overheard from the guards or the occasional mention of my

husband. I am sure it will be all useless to you. But please. I beg of you. If he finds out you were here, we are in danger.”

“Very well,” he said. “I do not know how to get you past the guard outside. We simply paid him, or rather one of your husband’s other associates did, to let us in. I am uncertain how to bribe him to let you out. I haven’t anything on hand to give him. And I am sure your husband will be quite horrified to find you gone.”

“I am sure that he will. But that is all the more reason for you to take us. You do not know what he is capable of. I do. Perhaps...”

Suddenly, an idea came to Winnifred.

“I think I have an idea, Seth. Taking them with us might just bring back Leo and Rose—and we may have a chance to punish Elton for what he’s done.” She blinked, suddenly playful. “Your Grace, when is the last time you have planted a facer on somebody?”

For a moment, Seth looked at her utterly startled, but then a grin spread across his handsome face.

“Miss Keating, I must say I am rather shocked at your suggestion. I am a Peer of the Realm, and I do not habitually plant facers on anybody. Though, I am rather skilled at hand-to-hand combat, if that is your question.”

She grinned at him. “Good. Very good.” As Seth made his way toward the front door, Winnie turned to mother and daughter. “Frances, Helena, let us go. Your path to freedom awaits at the hands of His Grace. But first, I must request this—do you have a quill and ink?”

Chapter 32

The following afternoon, the woman and her daughter were settled at Winnifred's home, their plan set in motion. Seth stretched his fingers, and pain soared up his arm, causing him to wince.

"Your Grace, would you like some more ice?" Mary asked, her attention withdrawn from the tea she was currently serving.

"No, Mary, it is already getting better. But I thank you. When I return to Lester House this evening, I will be sure to have the housekeeper apply some more of your tincture. It has helped."

Mary curtsied and then continued pouring tea for Winnifred, Victoria, Frances, and little Helena.

A day had passed since he planted a facer on the guard standing outside Elton's home. It has been surprisingly easy. It wasn't as if Seth was in the habit of punching criminals in the face, although it had felt like it. Then, as he remembered the crunch as his fist connected with the man's nose, he shuddered. The sound had been disturbing. But it did the trick.

Mother and daughter had been safely tucked away at Winnifred's home since then. They decided against taking them to Lester House simply because Winnifred assumed that a home filled with a cat, kittens, and a dog would make Helena feel a lot more comfortable. And she was right. Helena sat on the chaise, her legs crossed, and two of the kittens were sleeping in her lap. Pugsley, the dog, sat beside Frances, who gently scratched the dog between the ears.

Bell, the cat, was perched on top of the fireplace mantle and kept a careful eye on the little girl and her babies. It was idyllic—almost. Yes, if Leo and Rose had been there, it would have been a beautiful afternoon. However, they weren't. Not yet.

“So, what is the plan?” Frances asked as she picked up a cup of tea delicately. “What if my husband does not find the letter you left?”

Winnifred shook her head. “There is no chance of that at all. I left it right on the table in your formal drawing room. He will know that you are with us. And he will get in touch.”

“Winnifred is correct. I suspect we will have a reply from your husband any moment now,” Seth confirmed and joined the party. He lingered behind Winnie’s chair, one hand on the back of it and the other so close to her shoulder his fingertips gently touched her through her thin, silk gown.

He remained mesmerized by her quick wit. It had been Winnifred’s idea to leave a note for Elton, letting him know just who had helped free his wife and daughter. The letter also informed him that they knew their siblings were alive, and they were open to negotiations. Yes, finally, they had the upper hand, thanks to Frances and Helena.

“You will not make us go back to him, will you?” Helena said with wide eyes and a fearful voice. “If he promises to return Lady Rose and Lord Drayton?”

“You will never have to go back. That will never happen.” Seth promised. “Once we hear from your father, we will make a plan. And the plan will result in the return of my sister and Leo. And your freedom.”

“Do you suppose we should call on Mr. Markham?”

Seth smiled at Winnifred. “Ah, Winnie, I have already sent a messenger to him, as well as to Mr. Weston. Of course, I do not want to involve the Bow Street Runners, not after their terrible conduct at Vauxhall Gardens. However, I would like Mr. Weston’s advice. And of course, Mr. Markham’s.”

“I can only apologize again for what my husband has done to your family. It hurts my heart knowing the pain he has inflicted upon both of you. I can never thank you enough for rescuing us out of

that awful situation.”

Seth shook his head. “There is no need to thank us. We only did what was right. And you must not apologize for the actions of your husband. You bear no responsibility. You are an innocent party, just as our siblings are. Just as so many victims of crimes are. Believe me when I tell you this, with your help, the Roamers will be brought to justice. I promise you.”

Seth walked over to the window and looked out over the streets of London. From Winnifred’s drawing room, the park beyond was visible. Revelers, old and young, made their way to the park, and Seth wished for nothing more than to be just as carefree as these people.

“Soon, soon, this will all be over. I can feel it in my bones.” Winnie said as she stepped up beside him.

Seth gently took her hand, caressing it with his fingertips before removing his hand again. He did not wish to be so open with his affections to her. Not even in front of her sister and their guests. They weren’t as yet officially betrothed, and he didn’t want to put their newfound bond at risk by making it too obvious.

Somehow, it doesn’t seem right to declare my love for her in a public manner without speaking to Leo first. How wonderful it will be when I can finally tell him that I so ardently love his sister and that I wish to make her my wife. Just when he will tell me the same about my sister.

Seth smiled to himself as he looked out onto the street, next to the woman he loved. With any good fortune, they would be together as a family soon, and their future—free from secrets and constraints—could commence.

Together they stood and watched the road until, suddenly, from a distance the figure of a man cloaked in black rushed down the street.

“That must be him.” Seth exclaimed and turned. He sprinted out of

the room and down the stairs, Winnifred and Victoria right behind him. The three stood and waited until someone knocked on the door.

As they watched Mr. Purvis open the door, Frances and Helena joined them in the hall. Purvis received the communication from the man whose cloak obscured his features. It was impossible to tell if he was the same one who had delivered the false notification of their siblings' deaths. But it didn't matter.

The moment he had handed over his notification, the man turned and dashed away, his cloak fluttering in the breeze.

Winnifred retrieved the letter from the butler and ripped it open. As her eyes scanned the note, she broke into a smile.

"Seth, send for Mr. Weston. This is the letter we have been waiting for."



* * *

Frances sat on the chaise, the letter in her husband's handwriting in her lap. Winnie could only imagine what it had to feel like for the woman. She didn't want to marry him; he was forced upon her. Just like his life's choices were forced upon her.

In a way, she was born into this role of gang leader's bride the same way Vicky and I were born into our lives as daughters of a Baron. We all had so little choice over how our lives turned out, so little control. Always at the mercy of the men in our lives. But it doesn't have to end that way for her. She can find freedom. She can make her own life. There's no need for her to suffer anymore, not after this.

To think it would be Elton's wife who finally brought about this

turn of events was almost the most shocking thing to happen. When she first ventured into St. Giles from Mr. Markham's office, she could not have imagined it would be so. How curious life could be.

"Mrs. Banks, may I?"

Winnie was still startled to learn the gang leader's last name, Banks. She'd thought of him only as Elton until now. With a nod, the woman handed the letter to Mr. Weston.

I want my family. How clever of you to take them from me in exchange for your siblings. And how clever of you to figure out they are still alive. I venture to say it was Peter, that traitor, who told you. He will get his. But first—I want my family. I will admit I have been outwitted for now.

Meet me on Friday, at Hyde Park. We will meet at midnight on the north side of the Ring. No authorities. I stress this once more due to past experiences. If I so much as smell a Bow Street Runner, I will kill your siblings in front of you. So this time, you can be sure they are dead. Do not test me.

Elton

"Well, it sounds as though we are in control this time," Seth said. Beside him, Mr. Weston lowered the letter and nodded his head.

"Indeed, it does. I am glad that you have included me in your planning, and I would like to suggest something that I know may not be very welcome here. In light of what happened recently."

"We're not having any Bow Street Runners but you involved. Not this time," Victoria announced with determination in her voice. Seth could not help but smile at the young girl. Oh, how she had changed these past few days.

"I must agree with Victoria. We have asked you here because you have, indeed, been helpful to us, and you are truly the only one of your compatriots that has been trustworthy. In addition, Mr.

Markham speaks very highly of you.”

Weston turned and nodded at Markham, who stood at the window, his arms crossed in front of his broad chest.

“Your Grace, I understand your concern. But this time, it is different. I have a plan. I want to present it to Mr. Henderson, and with Mr. Markham’s help, I am sure we can convince him to go with my plan if you approve it.”

Seth stepped from one foot to the other and closed his eyes as a trifling headache announced itself behind his right eyeball.

“We may as well listen to him.” Winnifred said, much to Seth’s surprise.

He blinked at her, and Victoria shook her head vigorously from side to side. “Winnifred, you cannot be serious.”

“Mr. Weston has not led us wrong thus far. We can at least hear him out.”

When nobody else objected, Weston nodded.

“Very well. My plan is this. We will arrive early, a small group of the Runners, handpicked by myself and Mr. Markham, who is familiar with all of them. We will hide and wait. It will be easy to disguise ourselves in the dark of night. Elton wants to meet at night, as opposed to the afternoon, as was the case at Vauxhall Gardens. We will wait for the exchange to be made, and then, as he leaves, we pounce. Simple as that.”

“Your last plan sounded just as simple, and look what happened,” Victoria complained.

Seth was about to agree with her when Frances cleared her throat.

“Your Grace, I know you gave your word that Helena and I would

not be forced to return to my husband. But pray, how exactly would you get us back from him if we do not follow Mr. Weston's plan? After all, to get your siblings, we'd have to switch places with them."

Seth scratched his chin. "I plan to negotiate with your husband. Ensure that he first lets go of our siblings. I will not release you and your daughter until we have our siblings. He does not know that you don't wish to return to him. He's under the impression that we came and snatched you from your home and are keeping you hostage. Thus, I venture to say that I have a good possibility of having our siblings released first. Then when they're in our possession, we will leave. Well, we may need to run rather than walk."

Now that Seth made his plan known to all, doubts crept in. It seemed so simple, so easy when he thought of it but now, he could see the holes in his plan.

What if Elton suspects that she came with us willingly? Indeed, he must know that his wife is desperately unhappy at his side. What if he will not let Leo and Rose go unless I release his wife and daughter first?

He looked across the room to Winnifred, and the doubt was evident on her face.

"That sounds very risky," Frances said with a tremble in her voice.

"I agree with the lady," Markham announced himself from the back of the room. He looked around from one person to the other. "Your Grace, your plan relies on a lot of unknown factors. And while I agree that the Bow Street Runners have not exactly shown themselves from their best side, I will say that Mr. Weston's plan is superior to yours by far."

Seth looked down at the floor, suddenly embarrassed.

"I don't think his plan sounds any more reckless than what Mr. Weston is proposing. Both of these plans carry with them a lot of

risks. I propose the following. We will have Mr. Weston and Mr. Markham put together a confederacy of investigators from the Runners. I do not want Mr. Henderson there. I do not care if he is the one in charge or not. He bungled the last attempt. Once we get there, Seth will attempt to implement his plan. If it does not work, and Elton will not agree to let our siblings go without receiving his family in return first, then we will use Mr. Weston's plan."

She shrugged and turned her palms up as she glanced around the room. After some mumbling, the party agreed to Winnifred's suggestion.

Thus, the plan was finalized, and by the end of it, Mr. Markham and Mr. Weston dashed off to the magistrate's court to assemble the group of investigators that would attend the exchange.

In the end, even Victoria had to agree that it was a good plan.

The party dispersed with Victoria taking Pugsley for a walk while Frances and her daughter retired to the guest-chamber, their nerves stretched to the limit.

As evening fell, and the sun set, bathing London in an orange glow, Winnifred found herself restless.

She ventured downstairs and out into the garden, and when she stepped into the late evening air, she spotted the familiar figure sitting at the bottom of the steps.

"Seth." He turned around, and it was evident from the expression on his face that he'd been lost in thought.

"Winnie. You look lovely this evening. Care to join me?"

She sat beside him as she smoothed her Pomona-green gown down carefully so as not to wrinkle it.

"I take it you are as restless as I am."

He smirked. "You could say that. I fully intended to return to Lester House as I had planned, but as I passed the garden door, I was reminded of the many times Leo and I have played Pall Mall over yonder." He pointed to the Pall Mall set in the far corner.

"Anxious?"

"Indeed," he said. Winnifred looped her arm through his, resting her head on his shoulder.

"I cannot wait until it is tomorrow evening. I do not know how to pass the hours. Will you stay here and keep me company?"

He looked down at her, and before he knew what he was doing, placed a kiss on her forehead.

"Of course, Winnifred. Tonight, more than ever, I need your company. And tomorrow, we will face off to Elton and rescue our families."

"We will. We shall be united again, all of us together." She kept her head on his shoulder, and together, the two sat and watched the sunset, bidding farewell to the last day they would have to pass without their siblings.

Chapter 33

The evening hour was chilly, and Winnifred wrapped her redingote closer around herself. She wished now she listened to Mary's advice and brought a shawl, but it seemed unnecessary as she stood in the warmth of her drawing room.

It was almost midnight as she, Seth, Frances, and Helena stood on the gravel of the area known as the Ring in Hyde Park. In the daytime, this was the area where the aristocracy liked to take their carriages for riding. Leo often took Winnie there to circle his curricule around.

Usually, Winnie loved the area. It was preferable to the promenade walk her aunt often took Victoria on, for from atop the vehicle, she could see far and wide.

She'd never been here at night. A lady did not venture into the park after dark, and certainly never alone. Now that she saw it for the first time after dark, she had to admit Hyde Park lost its charm when one could not see the beautiful landscapes. It was eerie, almost frightening.

I wonder if Elton selected this area specifically to make us feel uncomfortable. Perhaps it is his intention to drive as much fear into us as he can to unbalance us. Well, that will not happen. Not when Leo and Rose are so very close.

She perused the area. Mr. Weston's superior had begrudgingly agreed to his plan and sent four investigators, handpicked by Weston and Markham, to Hyde Park. The men were hidden in the dark behind several bushes. Winnifred scrutinized the area as closely as she could to ensure that the authorities did not give away their plan again as they had at Vauxhall Gardens.

"I can't see them anywhere." She finally confessed quietly. Seth slowly nodded his head as he followed her gaze.

"Neither can I. Good. Now we need to...."

"Papa!" Helena said and pointed to a spot in the distance. It was dark, the crescent moon stood high in the sky, but it gave little light. Neither did the stars, making the entire affair even more unnerving.

"We ought to have brought a lantern," Seth said regretfully.

Winnie spotted several figures walking across the grass and then step onto the gravel pathway. There were four figures in total. At least four she could see. Winnie wondered if perhaps there were others hidden in the foliage. It would make sense for Elton to bring extra support. But then again, would a man like him want to admit that his family was snatched from under him? Perhaps that was the sort of thing a gang leader didn't want his underlings to know.

Beside her, Seth gasped as he looked in the direction of the four figures.

"Rose..." He whispered. As their eyes got used to the darkness, and as the party before them approached ever closer, Winnie too could make out the shape of Lady Rose. She was a short woman with a beautiful, curvaceous figure. Winnifred always admired the way the young woman walked, with her hips swaying gracefully.

One of the figures before them walked precisely like that. Behind her was a tall fellow, much taller than anybody else in the group. She knew at once that this was Leo.

"Leo!" She called out and waved. The figure stopped but was promptly shoved forth by the fourth person, the man she assumed was Elton.

The group stopped a few steps away from Winnifred and Seth. And

for the first time in almost a month, she had her eyes firmly cast upon her brother's face.

He looked thinner than he had before he disappeared, even in the dim light of the stars. His shoulders were slumped forward, but he appeared uninjured. The same was true for Rose.

"Frances! There you are, my dear. Are you injured? Have they touched you? Because if they have, I will hurt their siblings right here, right now, in the same way that they have harmed you."

The deep gravelly voice spoke, suppressed rage swinging with every word—Elton.

"I'm not hurt. Neither is Helena. They have treated us as well as I hope you have treated their siblings."

For a brief moment, there was silence, and then Elton cleared his throat. "Any guests of mine are treated well. You've taught me all about hospitality, Frances. Haven't you been treated well, Lady Rose?"

"Yes," Rose's shaky voice replied. "Mr. Elton. Very well."

Beside her, Seth shifted at the sound of his sister's voice.

"Well, Elton, here we all are. Let our siblings go, and then I will send your wife and daughter over to you."

Winnifred took a deep breath. This was the moment they would find out if Seth's plan would work.



For a split second, Seth thought his plan would work. But then Elton broke into a burst of roaring laughter, and he knew he'd been wrong. His plan was flawed—and failed.

"You must think me stupid. Do you think I have never done a prisoner exchanged before? No. I will not send your siblings over there. What will happen is as follows. I will have your sister set free. And in exchange, at the same time, he will set my daughter free. They will pass one another and return to our loving arms. And then we will do the same with my wife and Lord Drayton."

Seth swallowed. He felt incredibly naïve and stupid for having ever considered that this plan might work. Then, with a deep sigh, he nodded and turned to Helena. He placed a hand on her shoulder and lowered his voice. "Don't you worry. All will be well. Go now. Go to your father."

Slowly the little girl walked forward, and at the same time, Rose started in their direction. Seth's heart beat out of his chest as he saw his sister's familiar shape come closer and closer, and at last, just as she had passed Helena, she broke into a run and flew into his arms.

"Seth! It has been so long. I can't believe it. Finally, finally, I'm free. You rescued us! I knew you would."

"Oh, my darling Rose. To hold you in my arms again, I cannot even explain the joy I feel in this moment."

"I have been foolish. I have kept so much from you. I am so sorry. I've put myself into this position and caused you so much trouble and cost myself and Leo so much harm."

He cupped her face in his hands. Don't worry, Rose, there's nothing to fear about anymore. Now you are free, and we are going home, and everything will be well. But first..."

"Enough with the heartfelt reunions," Elton said, with one arm around his daughter. If he hugged or kissed her when she arrived at his side, Seth hadn't seen it. But he wouldn't be terribly surprised if

the man hadn't. He didn't seem to care about his wife or daughter. They were, it seemed, nothing but pawns or perhaps status symbols for him.

"Send over my wife, and I'll send over Lord Drayton. Come on, let's do this. I have other matters I need to tend to."

Seth looked at Frances and nodded, and at once, the woman started walking along the gravel. As her footsteps faded away, those of Leo grew louder and louder, and just as Rose had, he fell into a run, and within a moment, Winnifred sobbed at their joyful reunion. Leo wrapped his arms around Winnie and lifted her in the air.

Seth noticed immediately how Rose looked at Leo. If he hadn't already found their letters and discovered their secret, he certainly would have known that she loved him just by the way she directed her eyes at him. When Leo let go of Winnie, he smiled at Rose, and his love for her was written all over his face.

Movement from the other side of the graveled path drew his attention again. Elton lingered, one hand around Frances's elbow and one around his daughter's wrist. The expression on Frances' face was one of utter terror. Seth wished he could rush toward them and free her from his grasp, but he knew he couldn't.

Where were those Runners? The exchange was done, and now it was their time. He was about to turn to his group to hurry them back down the road and toward their carriage when Elton's voice called out.

"Your Grace! I call this an exchange well done, wouldn't you agree?"

"Elton, you got what you wanted. So what are you still doing here?" Seth replied, trying to buy time. Surely, Weston and Markham would make a move any moment now.

Elton shrugged, and the man that had arrived with him, one of his henchmen no doubt, shifted and withdrew an object from beneath

his cape.

“What am I still doing here? Well, Your Grace. You are about to find out. You did not think you could break into my home, remove my family from under my roof, and get away with it? Did you?”

Anger brewed inside Seth as and his nostrils flared.

“May I remind you that you were the one who....”

Seth got no further. A deafening pistol shot ripped through the air.

He twisted to shield Winnie when his body exploded in pain, and the force of the lead ball connecting knocked him forward. His feet left the ground, the gravel sped toward him, and as the taste of blood filled his mouth, darkness swallowed him, and then—there was nothing.

Chapter 34

The room was entirely unfamiliar. When Seth attempted to push himself up, a sharp pain shot through his arm, sending him directly back into his pillows.

“Seth, be careful. You cannot put any pressure on your arm. You may hurt the wound.”

“My wound?” His head ached, and the entire world seemed foggy. But the outline of Winnifred became clear before him. “Winnie? What happened?”

She sat on the bed beside him and touched his hand.

“Elton shot you. He hit you in the arm. The force of the lead ball knocked you back, and your head connected with the ground. The physician said you likely have a concussion as well as a wound on your arm. Fortunately, the lead ball did not go through but only grazed the skin. He believes you will recover soon.”

The events of the previous night came back to him in a hazy manner. He remembered the movement before him as Elton raised the pistol to shoot him. He recalled the smell of the gunpowder that lingered in the air as he fell backward. Rose’s terrified face and...

“Rose. Where is Rose?”

“I am here.” Her voice alarmed him, for he could not see her, but then, she appeared by Winnifred’s side an instant later. She looked just as he remembered her. Her face pale, her eyes bright. It was almost as if she hadn’t been gone at all. She stood at his side and gently held on to his hand.

“They didn’t harm you, I trust?”

"They did not. The Roamers were a little rough sometimes, mostly when they moved us from place to place, but I wasn't hurt. Physically, I was not harmed, but I was terrified the entire time because I didn't know what would happen next. I will say Elton was the worst one. He would taunt us, ridicule us. He's a nasty man."

"Were you kept together? You and Leo, I mean? But Leo, how about him? Was he harmed? How did they treat him?"

"Quite the same as Rose, I'm pleased to say." Leo's voice sounded from the other side of the room. A bright smile appeared on Seth's face as his good friend stepped before him, looking entirely unharmed. He was thin, and there were dark circles under his eyes, but other than that, he seemed unscathed. He had even retained the mischievous sparkle in his eyes.

"Leo! At last!" Seth exclaimed as his friend wrapped his arms around Seth gently so as not to aggravate his wound further.

"I cannot tell you the ordeal we have gone through to find you."

Rose shook her head. "We can. Winnifred has done a thorough job in filling us in on everything that has happened here over the past few weeks. And we, in turn, have told her everything that happened to us."

"Which is to say, not much happened to us at all. However, I will say that we now know most of the flophouses and questionable taverns in St. Giles. We were moved almost daily. And after the mishap at Vauxhall Gardens, the accommodations only deteriorated."

"Were you at Vauxhall Gardens?" Seth asked eagerly.

Rose nodded. "They tied us up in the back of a coach and took us there. We were to be released upon the retrieval of the money. But, instead, they inspected the sack in the coach and found it empty, and immediately took us back to St. Giles. That was the only time there was any real violence."

Leo turned and showed what remained of a bruise on his cheek. "Elton was not happy with you at all."

"I can imagine, for he told us he'd murdered you."

Rose and Leo looked at each other, a flash of guilt on each of their faces.

"He was a terror. However, Elton's men were not near as awful as he, and they did not mistreat us. At times, they even kept us together."

"Which surely pleased you," Seth said. He meant to jest, but the atmosphere in the room changed as Rose and Leo glanced at one another, the worry evident in their faces.

"Has Winnie told you about our discovery?"

Rose could not look him in the eyes at all. Instead, she stared down at the floor as her face colored red. Leo, on the other hand, cleared his throat and stepped anxiously from one foot to the other as he looked at his friend.

"She has told us that you read our letters to aid your investigation. I cannot say that I am thrilled about this, but I can also not rebuke you for it, for eventually, it did lead to our recovery. And I certainly would've done the same thing."

Seth let out a breath of relief.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you about Rose and I." Leo started. Seth shook his head right away.

"No, I am sorry that you felt you could not confide in me. I am your friend. You should have felt as though you could tell me anything. But I was trapped in my mind, held captive by my grief over the death of my brother and my guilt on the matter. One day, I will tell you everything but for now, let me say this—I am sorry that I didn't

make it clear I was not concerned about your social standing. All I want is for you to be happy, for Rose to be happy. That is all.”

“Oh, Seth. I wish we had talked about David more,” Rose lamented. “I wish I had understood you better. I didn’t comprehend just how rejected you felt by our father. I knew he spent so much time with Cedric, and I knew that it bothered you, but I never appreciated just how much rejection you experienced at his hands. From now on, let us be open with one another. Let us not keep secrets.”

“I am in full agreement. The four of us and Victoria, we are the only family we have, aside from our cousin and your aunt and uncle—whom you likely will never see again. We must act as a family.”

“We are in concurrence on the matter,” Leo smiled broadly. “And when you are better, there is something I wish to talk to you about, pertaining to exactly this subject at hand. Family.” He reached for Rose’s hand, and she beamed at him.

“I have a good idea what you wish to speak to me about. We need not wait until I am better. I will gladly give my consent if it is what Rose wants.”

He knew from how Rose and Leo looked at one another that they had already discussed this matter. It did not greatly surprise him, for they had spent several weeks locked away with each other.

“It is,” Rose exclaimed. “Now more than ever.”

Winnifred, still seated beside him on the bed, grinned at her brother, clearly delighted.

“Oh Rose, how wonderful it will be to have you as a sister. I only hope that you do not mind your little barking nephew, Pugsley.”

Rose giggled. “Well, now that you have brought it up, perhaps I have to rethink my decision.”

A light chuckle sounded from the room as the atmosphere lifted, and a sense of peace settled upon the occupants.

“Where is Victoria, anyhow?” Seth asked.

“She and Pugsley accompanied Frances and Helena to the magistrate’s office. After Elton shot you, the Runners finally charged forth and apprehended him. Frances was escorted away for questioning, but Mr. Markham had gone with her to act on her behalf. It turns out her uncle arranged the marriage between her and Elton against her wishes. Then Elton and the uncle usurped Frances’ father, and then Elton turned on the uncle and killed him. Quite the story. I venture to say Ann Radcliff could not write a more intriguing novel.”

“Uncles...” Leo groaned and shook his head. “Who would’ve known that ours was quite so terrible?”

“He will receive his just punishment, do not fret. I have made sure of it.” Winnifred said.

Seth could not help but feel an immense sense of pride as he looked at Winnifred.

What a strong woman she is, what a guiding light in my life she has become.

Suddenly, he knew exactly what he had to do next. He cleared his throat and looked at Leo and Rose.

“Not that I am not delighted to see you both again and so well, and of course, I have endless questions to pose to you, but there was also something I wanted to talk to Winnifred about. In private. If you do not mind.”

Leo shrugged. “I do not mind at all. For I am certain I already know what you wish to talk to my sister about.” He leaned forward once more and embraced Seth, and as he did, he whispered, “She told me

all about the both of you. And you have my blessing.”

After embracing and kissing his sister, he watched as the two of them departed the chamber, hand in hand.

The moment the door closed behind them, Winnifred exhaled deeply and dropped her head into her hands.

“Seth...” He reached for her, and when she turned her head and raised her eyes to him, he saw she was crying.

“Winnifred, my love. Please do not cry. All is well. I am not hurt; our siblings are back.”

“I know. I know it. But when I saw you lying there, shot, I didn’t know where the lead ball hit you. And you were unconscious, you didn’t wake up. I called your name so many times. I... I kissed your face as you lay unconscious because I thought you were dying.”

“Oh, my darling.”

“Seth, I don’t know how I would live my life if I lost you. I know you and I have not been....”

Her words trailed off, and he realized it was because they had not defined their relationship these past few days. Too much turmoil consumed them to even think about it.

“You and I have been destined to be together for years, it was just that we let our prejudices get in the way. That is what I wanted to talk to you about. Seeing you so upset over the possibility of losing me makes me even more determined. Winnifred, I love you. I love you more than I have ever loved anybody. I don’t ever want to spend another day of my life without you.”

“Winnifred, please, will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?”

Once again, tears rolled down Winnifred's face, but this time, Seth knew that it was not out of despair but happiness.

"Yes! Of course. I love you, Seth. There's nothing I want more than being your wife." She leaned forward and gently caressed his face as he ran a hand through her hair. As their lips found each other, a sense of contentment and peace overcame Seth, for he knew then that this long, arduous journey was at last at an end.

And a new, much happier one was just beginning.

Epilogue

Two months later

Winnifred sat next to Seth on one of the hard pews at the very front of the little chapel. She placed a hand on top of his, and he ran a finger across the soft skin. Then, with a bright smile on her face, she looked around the interior of the chapel.

It was a beautiful place, built during the days of Henry the VIII. It carried an air of history with its statues and stained-glass windows. It was full of their friends and family, everyone eagerly awaited the arrival of the happy couple. The air vibrated with happiness and joy. And Leo and Rose richly deserved it.

After the trauma they had been through, they deserve nothing but the best. She smiled as she recognized some of the familiar faces sitting on either side of the aisle. Seth's cousin, Cedric, sat on the right side of the aisle, his housekeeper seated beside him. It was a peculiar arrangement, but over the past few weeks, Winnie had come to learn the housekeeper was childless, indeed, had no family at all. And Cedric lacked a mother and father—thus giving rise to their unusual friendship.

Following her gaze, Seth turned his head toward his cousin.

"I am ever so pleased that Cedric is here. I did not think he was going to be able to make it back from Derbyshire."

Seth smiled at her. "It was a wonderful idea of yours to send him to our estate for a lengthy stay. You are right, it is his family home as well. He seems much invigorated after his return," he smirked.

"Do you think he will find his place in the business?"

Seth shrugged. "Leo seems to think so. He will be the one to train him, and if nothing else, since he's not married nor plans to be anytime soon, he can travel for us. One of us must go to India to meet the suppliers for the sugar sooner rather than later, and I have no taste for a lengthy journey."

"Well, if he proves unsuitable, I would not mind going to India on a honeymoon, so to speak."

He winked at her. "I had another idea for that. But this isn't the time." He placed his index finger on his lips and grinned.

On the groom's side of the church sat Mr. Markham and Mr. Weston in the far-right corner. Mr. Weston had recently left the Bow Street Runners and joined Mr. Markham's business. Together the two built a stellar reputation, in part by the glowing reviews they received from the Keating and Dunn families.

"He is a rather handsome fellow," Victoria mused from beside Winnifred.

She looked at her sister, who sat in the pew with Pugsley on her lap. Winnie still considered the animal's presence in the chapel improper, but he seemed perfectly well-behaved for the time being. Perhaps he was inspired by the serenity of the church to stop his incessant barking.

"Who do you mean? Mr. Weston?"

Victoria colored. "I have always thought him a rather handsome fellow."

Winnifred did not quite know what to say to that. She shouldn't have been surprised. Ever since Leo's return, Mr. Weston had regularly visited them at the London home to make inquiries into the Roamers gang. Even now, he often stopped to question Leo when it came to new cases related to St. Giles and the Roamers. With the help of Leo and Rose, many of Elton's underlings, who had not been present when their leader was apprehended, were taken

into custody.

Recently Winnie found that Victoria was more and more present whenever Mr. Weston came to call on their home. She should not have been surprised that her sister would take to him, mainly since he turned out to be a great lover of dogs—pugs in particular—just like Victoria.

“There might be another wedding in our near future.” Seth chuckled as he looked at Victoria, who in turn remained mesmerized by Mr. Weston.

“Perhaps, perhaps. But can you imagine? The two of them together and the pugs? They shall need a house far away in the country, lest all the neighbors are driven to Bedlam by the barking.”

“We will certainly have to secure our library every time they come to visit.” The two chuckled and drew curious glances from some of the other guests. Winnifred didn’t care. She was happy. Seth made her happy, happier than she had been in a very long time. And she no longer cared about what anybody thought.

“Oh look, there’s Frances and Helena,” Victoria said and indicated the woman who had just entered, along with her daughter.

Frances gave a small wave when she noticed them looking, and Helena beamed at them. Together they slipped into one of the pews in the back.

“I feel so terrible for them. I know that Frances is now, at last, free, with Elton arrested and no chance of ever being released, she no longer has to worry about him. But at the same time, she is now a woman alone—with a small child. And all of London knows that she is the wife of the most notorious gang leader. I can’t imagine what her life will be like,” Winnie said.

After the arrest, Frances and Helena returned home to St. Giles, where they remained for now. However, without an income, Frances would not be able to stay there for very much longer.

“What is it, Winnie? You appear rather vexed.” Seth said quietly.

“It’s Frances. I worry about her. And Helena.”

Seth nodded his head. “I understand. But you need not worry. After the ceremony, during the wedding breakfast, I intend to introduce her to Cedric.”

Winnifred frowned at this. “How is introducing her to Cedric going to solve her problems?”

“Well, you have been to Cedric’s home. You have seen how large it is. The entire upper floor isn’t occupied. As you know, Cedric has but one attendant. Since he will be working with us, he will have funds available. He will host clients in his home in due time—at least Leo thinks so. Thus, he requires further help. Frances needs employment and a home. It seems only to make sense. Besides, there is a school for girls not far, and I thought perhaps I could pay for Helena’s tuition as well as their rent if they lived nearer to the school.”

Her heart swelled at Seth’s charitable nature. He reminded her of her parents. They’d been such good people, always aiming to help others.

Winnifred glanced over her shoulder again at the woman. Would she be happy as a maid? Then again, Cedric appeared to be a rather pleasant young man, at least in her short interactions with him. Before Winnifred could comment any further, a side door to the chapel opened, and her brother stepped through. He positioned himself at the front of the chapel, next to the vicar, and beamed at her. He looked happy and contented.

His hair, which one of the Roamers had cut to keep him from being recognized when he took him to Vauxhall Gardens, had begun to grow back. It grazed his earlobes now. In his new trousers, burgundy-colored waistcoat, and tailcoat, he looked smashing. And happy. Winnifred hadn’t been surprised at all when, upon revealing the truth of their relationship, and the depth of their feelings, Leo

made a marriage offer to Seth immediately. And Seth gladly agreed. Now, only two months later, here Leo and Rose were, getting married.

Beside her, Victoria sobbed. Winnie grinned at her sister's display.

"What is it, Vicky? The ceremony hasn't even begun yet?"

"I know it. I know it. But I am just so happy for them, I cannot contain myself. This is so much better than any of my romance novels."

Winnifred shook her head, but she couldn't help smiling. Lately, she and her sister had been getting along much better. She still found Pugsley and her sister's habit of not tending to him properly irritating, but the undercurrent of vitriol between them was gone. Of course, they would likely never be friends, but maybe they could at least become closer.

She noticed her sister craning her neck again.

"I thought she might come."

Winnifred shook her head. She knew immediately who her sister was talking about. Their Aunt Anna. Ever since the arrest of their Uncle Ezekiel, neither had heard from their aunt. Leo intended to call on her one of these days but hadn't found himself in the right frame of mind just yet.

She'd been notified of the wedding, and there had been some worry she might show up to make a scene, but thanks to Mr. Markham and Mr. Weston, the chapel was well protected from such an intrusion.

"It is better for her that she doesn't. I am surprised she hasn't left Clerkenwell. I am sure reporters from the scandal sheets have been haunting her as well."

"I had several of the scandal sheet informants following me at Almack's on Wednesday," Victoria confirmed.

"I am almost envious of Leo and Rose. They get to go on a honeymoon and do not have to worry about the Morning Gazette and assorted other papers trying to follow them. On the other hand, I cannot even make my way to the office without someone following me and wishing to get my account of the events. After two months, you would think that they would finally lose interest," Seth sighed.

Winnifred took his hand. She had to confess the attention had been difficult. It seemed as though everywhere they went, their actions regarding the return of their siblings preceded them.

At every dinner, every ball they were invited to, both Winnifred and Seth were set upon by their fellow lords and ladies, requesting details of the rescue. It seemed while Leo and Rose were kept at a little bit of a distance, Winnifred and Seth were becoming bright stars in the sky of high society. And quite against their wishes.

She did not have time to dwell on her vexation about the matter any further, for at that very moment, the chapel door opened, and Rose appeared.

Beside her, Seth gasped at the sight of his sister. Rose looked beautiful. She wore a white silk gown, with a matching silk cape attached at the shoulders. It swept behind her on the floor as she walked towards the aisle. In her hand, she clutched a bouquet of wildflowers, and several of them were sprinkled through her hair.

What struck Winnifred most of all was the bright, beaming smile on her face as she approached Leo. Winnie still wondered if Rose's decision to walk the aisle on her own bothered Seth, as it would have been customary for him to do so, but he appeared entirely unconcerned about the matter. She, too, was now in tears.

Victoria and Winnifred dabbed their eyes throughout the ceremony, which was lengthy, as Anglican weddings always were.

She held Seth's hand throughout it, and when she looked at him from the corner of her eye, she often saw him dab his eyes as well. As she glanced around the interior of the chapel, there was not a dry eye to be seen. Leo and Rose were loved. Their return, and their union, touched everybody's hearts.

When, finally, the vicar declared them married, Winnifred leaned her head against Seth's shoulder. They watched as the newly married couple exited the chapel, followed by their guests. Everyone was returning to Lester House, where the wedding breakfast would be held.

"Are you coming?" Victoria asked, as she made her way down the aisle. Winnifred was busy tucking her handkerchief back into her reticule and got up when Seth reached for her wrist.

"Would you stay with me just for one more moment? We will join you soon, Victoria," he told her sister, who nodded and skipped down the aisle.

"What is it, Seth? Something on your mind?"

"Indeed, there is." He got up and took hold of both of her hands. "Winnifred, I know we are to get married in the winter, but after sitting through the ceremony today, I have realized I do not wish to marry here."

Winnifred's mouth dropped open.

"You do not wish to get married?" Her voice came out almost breathless with shock.

"No, that is not at all what I meant. I meant I do not wish to marry like this. It was a beautiful ceremony, and I was glad to see all of our nearest and dearest come here for our siblings. But for you and I, I thought perhaps it might be nicer to... Well... I thought perhaps you and I...."

She tilted her head to one side as a smile spread across her lips. She knew exactly what he was talking about.

“You wish to marry in a ceremony attended to just by the two of us and a vicar?”

“I do. And this is exactly why I wish to marry you in the first place. I may stammer and fall over my words, and yet somehow, you know exactly what I intend to say. You are the one for me, Winnie. I want to make you my wife, and I do not wish to wait until winter. And I do not wish to do it here in a chapel. My greatest desire is for our wedding to be for us. Not anybody else.”

“Faith, Seth, I feel the same way. This was a lovely ceremony, but after all the attention, and all the triviality of people, what I crave most is quiet. And privacy.”

He let go of her hands and cupped her face instead. “Well, since we agree, let me ask you this. How do you feel about Scotland?”

“A wedding at Gretna Green?”

His eyes twinkled as he slowly nodded his head. Her smile lit up her entire face.

“Yes. I say yes to marrying at Gretna Green. Then, we can have a honeymoon in Scotland right after. I love the Scottish Highlands.”

“My love, I know you do. It will be beautiful. Shall we return home? We can leave for Scotland the moment Leo and Rose set out on their honeymoon.”

Winnifred beamed at him. The idea of running away to Scotland with the man she loved excited her. And she would have left that very moment if she could have, but she knew after the trauma of the last several weeks, she couldn’t do that to her siblings.

“I cannot wait to go to Scotland. And I cannot wait to be your wife.

But, Seth, this has truly been an adventure the two of us have been on. I know I couldn't have done any of it without you. You've inspired me, and you've given me so much strength. All of these years, I dreamt about what it would be like to be with you, but the reality is so much more remarkable than my dreams could ever have imagined."

"Oh, my love, I feel the same way. All those years I wasted when I could've been with you. But no matter. We are together now, and we will be always. From this day forward. I love you, Winnifred."

"And I love you."

He bent forward, and when his lips met hers, happiness flooded Winnifred, and a sense of contentment settled upon her, for she knew she would be with him, her best friend, her love, for the rest of their lives.

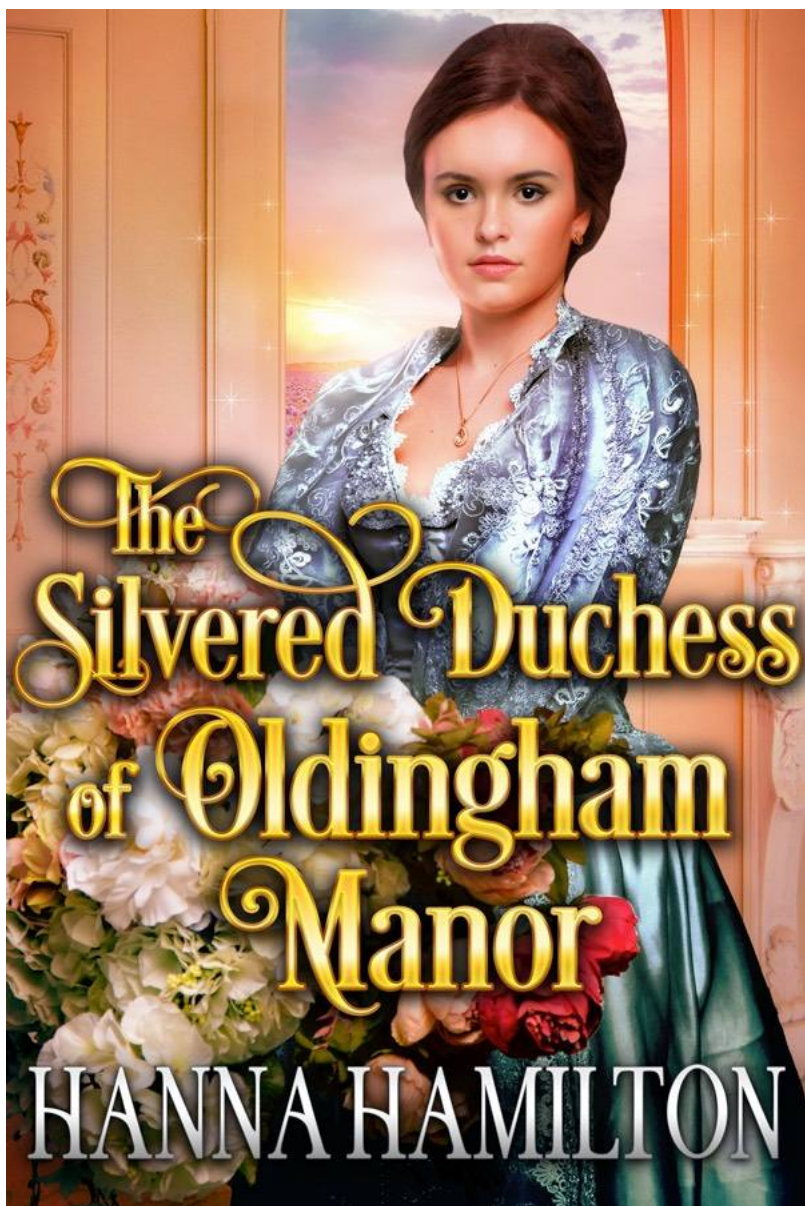
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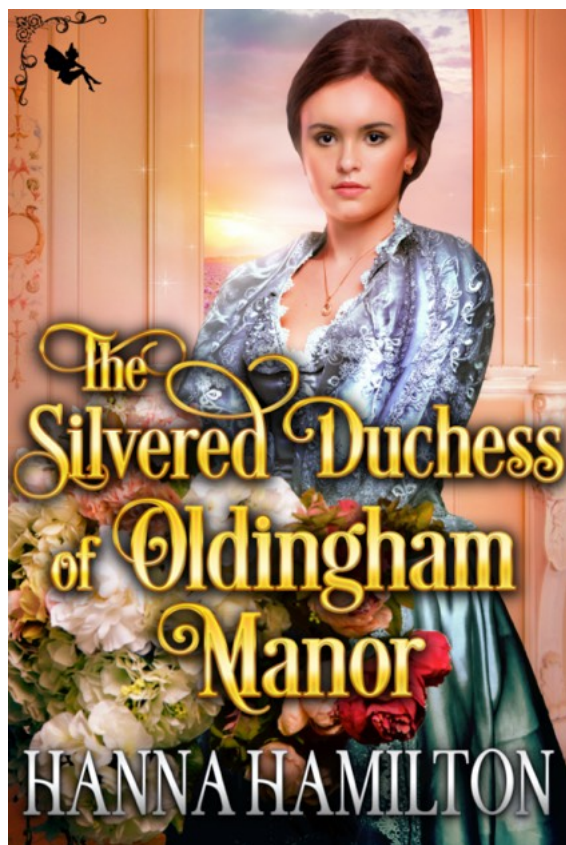
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Before you go, turn the page for an extra treat from me...

More sweet historical romance

Turn on to the next page to read the first chapters of *The Silvered Duchess of Oldingham Manor*, my best-selling Amazon novel.



Preview: The Silvered Duchess of Oldingham Manor

Prologue

Odile looked across at her sister, trying to still the worry in her heart. She was in the drawing room, the candlelight soft on the wallpaper and touching the dark wooden furniture with pale highlights. She studied the curly blonde hair and blue eyes of Harriet, who watched her and waited for her decision.

Odile ran a hand through her own dark hair, tense and anxious. Her head pounded with the weight of what she was deciding. She had already concluded that there was only one course of action, but saying it would make it true.

“Yes,” she said at last. “Yes, you shall go to London.”

They looked at each other. In the silence of the room, the only sound was the fireplace as the ashes shifted and settled, a small, crinkling sound that would otherwise have been barely noticeable.

“But...sister,” Harriet murmured. She was looking up at her with wide eyes and sounded frightened. “I’m scared. And you said we couldn’t afford it.”

Odile let out a long sigh. “I did say that. Yes. But as it is, I was talking to Mr. Murray and he says that we are not as badly in debt as I believed.”

At least, that was partly true. She had talked to the butler, who also took charge of the household accounts, and they had together decided that all the excess they had should be spent on a proper Season for her sister. It was getting increasingly necessary, Odile thought. Their uncle would take over the house—should their father pass away—and he was not known for his generosity.

One of them had to wed before that happened.

“Are you certain?”

“Yes. Definitely,” she said, forcing a strength to the statement that she did not feel. She was far from certain, but she did know one

thing—it was essential for her little sister to have the best possible Season and a chance for a good match. This might be the last thing that Odile could offer her. She had no idea when their wealth would diminish altogether.

Odile had managed the estate in all but name for the last four years, since their father's illness became worse, making it impossible for him to continue running it. She did not relish the thought of their uncle—who was known, if jokingly, as the least-generous person in London—taking over the task.

“Oh!” Her sister's expression changed from fear to delight. “Well, then, hurray! I am so excited!”

Odile smiled. The brightness in those bright blue eyes was the one thing that made all of this worthwhile. “I'm glad,” she said firmly. “And now, let's go upstairs. There are some copies of the *Gazette* there, and we can look at the pictures and decide how the gowns should look.”

“How many will I have?” her sister asked, eyes wide and round.

“Um...five, maybe,” she said, feeling queasy. Where had that number come from so suddenly? Odile hadn't thought about it at all. At almost a guinea a gown, that was probably about what they could afford, but only just.

“Five? Really?” her sister stared at her. Her blue eyes were wide as plates. Odile grinned.

“Yes, five. Four of muslin and maybe one of silk. We shall have to talk to Mrs. Huddersley about it.” She referred to the seamstress who made their clothes.

“Odile? Really? Five, and almost all of them muslin. Oh! I am so excited,” her sister said, her voice soft with wonder and bafflement.

Odile looked at the *Gazette* with her sister for a few minutes, then went across to her bedchamber and sat down on the bed, feeling worry weigh on her shoulders like a gray cloud. She ran her fingers through her hair, trying to calm down.

“What can we do?”

She looked at her reflection in the mirror. Her own green eyes

studied her, their depths watchful. She could see the signs of worry and care that years of being in charge of the estate had set there. Odile had taken the weight on herself of taking care of everything. She was only four-and-twenty years old, but she thought the fine lines on her forehead and at the edges of her pale pink lips made her seem older.

Choosing to have a Season for herself this year, or to let her sister go instead, had been hard, but the end choice had been obvious. She had to put her sister first. It hadn't really even been a choice; more like an instinct, something she couldn't help herself doing. It had been like that always. Ever since her sister had first come into her life. She recalled that day so plainly; the small bundle her father brought downstairs, so wide-eyed and so helpless, as if she herself was bewildered to be brought into the world.

She had not cared about anything else after that. Harriet had become her whole world. The death of their mother had been a massive wounding for them both, but Odile had Harriet, and from then nothing had mattered.

She knew she had to do everything to make Harriet's coming-out beautiful and successful. Her sister was just sixteen, and she deserved the best possible Season. It would be her first, while Odile already had two, and those not successful. She was choosing between another for herself, or a coming-out for Harriet, and the choice was clear.

She stood, drew in a deep breath, and went downstairs to find Mr. Murray. He would be able to send to the village for fabrics, and they would begin the work of making the gowns and organizing the trip to London.

Chapter 1

Odile stood in the hall at Almack's, looking out across the ballroom. The floor was brightly polished, the shine of it dazzling to the eye, sparkling under the light of a dozen crystal chandeliers. She had already been to the place a dozen times that Season, but she still felt sick with nerves.

She was not here to take part, but simply to chaperone Harriet, who was dressed for the ball. She herself had a much plainer gown. She would rather not have come, but there was nobody else to chaperone Harriet, and she would rather do it herself—her protectiveness would not let her send Harriet alone. She waited on the stairs, watching the ladies in white gowns and the gentlemen in dark jackets as, somewhere at the back, the musicians were tuning up, ready to play a dance.

She glanced sideways at her sister. Harriet was standing beside her, the long white satin gown reaching her ankles, the waist high and defined with a silk band. Harriet looked frightened. The neck of the gown was square and low, the skirt floaty and soft. There were ribbons and lace in her hair and her skin was so pale in the candlelight. Her blue eyes were wide with fearfulness.

"There are so many people there," her sister whispered. "I always hate having to go in like this."

Odile smiled. "I believe we need to. It wouldn't be much good if we stood out here. We can't really dance in this hallway."

Her sister giggled. "You're right. Imagine that," she looked around, twirling in the corridor. "Look at me! Dancing in the hallway!"

Odile grinned, then gently but firmly took Harriet's hand. "Come on, then. We should go in. I have our passes somewhere..." she paused, reaching into the drawstring reticule that hung from her arm. She was wearing a plain cream gown, the one she had worn for her own Season last year. It was made of muslin, the neck low-cut and round, the waist high and the sleeves long. It was

serviceable and elegant, and with her hair arranged elaborately on her head, she thought it looked stylish, if a little overly sober. She had a little drawstring reticule on her arm in white silk.

Odile found the passes—two pieces of paper with their names printed on them, signed by one of the ladies who regulated all entrance to Almack's. The passes were extremely hard to get, since one had to either know one of the ladies who issued them, or they could be purchased for a fee. That, in itself, was one of the expenses that came up each Season.

Odile handed the passes to the footman, and he handed them to a colleague on the front step, who announced them.

“Miss Odile and Miss Harriet, daughters of the Baron of Staveley.”

Everybody stared up.

Gripping the balustrade with one hand, with the other Odile held her sister's hand, feeling her warm fingers through the thin gloves. The gesture was as much to reassure her sister as herself. She waited for the strange spell to wear off the guests, making them turn away, falling back into talking as if nothing happened.

The heads would turn away—they always did. Odile reckoned it took people three seconds at most to forget about what a stranger was doing and fuss about the impression they were making themselves.

“Sister, there are so many people...” her sister whispered in her ear. “I hate this and I can't go in.”

“Yes, you can,” her sister reassured her swiftly. “We don't really need to do anything, not really. We just need to stand about and talk to people, and then somebody will come up to dance with you. Just wait and see.”

“But, sister...”

“All we have to do is wait,” she said patiently. “Elmore is here. He's going to dance with you.”

“Yes!” Harriet grinned. “Yes. He is. I cannot wait to see him.”

She could not help but smile at her younger sister. Elmore, Baron

Bromford, was a very nice, handsome young man who Harriet had met almost instantly at her first ball. He was shy, kind, and good-natured, and as far as Odile could see, Harriet was deeply in love already. Her face lit up at the very mention of him.

Odile would be more than happy to ensure their father approved the match.

She watched as Elmore came across the floor, as she knew he would, the candlelight shining on his brown hair. He looked as handsome as ever in his gray jacket, his breeches a darker gray, and Odile was so pleased to see him greeting Harriet. She watched them, saw him bow and take her hand and lead her out onto the floor.

She felt her own heart suffuse with love for them both.

She let out a long sigh and looked around the hall.

It was full of people, and most of them were making their way onto the dance floor, moving over in a sea made of dark coats and pale gowns. She leaned back on the wall and watched them. Odile had always enjoyed being outside the scheme of things. Since she was a child, observation had become her strength. She had not yet met anyone who appealed to her—besides, she barely had any time to consider a match. She was too busy for courtship, and she had to admit that none of the young men who had approached her had caught her fancy even a little. They were silly, selfish, or cruel, in her opinion, loudmouthed or sullen or critical. She had not met any who she thought were better company than she had right now, standing here by herself.

“Odile,” an older woman greeted her. Odile smiled at Lady Alston, a friend of her family. She was perhaps ten years older than her own mother would have been, and she’d always looked kindly on Odile and Harriet, always asking after their health whenever they were in London, and calling frequently at the house.

“Lady Alston,” she greeted, dropping a low curtsy. “How do you do?”

“Well, thank you. And I can see you do well, my dear. You look so beautiful! You must be turning heads tonight, with that fine

hairstyle. It suits you quite wonderfully.”

“Thank you, Lady Alston,” Odile said. She felt a little sad. She hadn’t turned any heads—at least, not as far as she knew—but she was touched that Lady Alston thought she might. She looked up at the ceiling. The kind words had touched nerves that she didn’t even know were bruised.

“And your father? He is a bit better, I hope?”

Odile looked away, not wanting the kindly older woman to see the look in her eyes when she replied to her. “I think perhaps a little,” she said.

She was deeply worried for her father. He did not look well at all; at least not in her opinion. He had looked very ill when she saw him that evening, and for the last few days he’d barely eaten. It had taken her an hour to make him eat half a bowl of gruel. Caring for him was draining her—not because it was hard, but because it took so much strength from her to look into his haggard face and smile, hiding her concerns.

“My dear, you are a wonderful daughter,” Lady Alston said.

Odile didn’t try to hide how much that remark touched her when she replied to Lady Alston. “Thank you. It means a great deal to me that someone says that.” Her voice wobbled.

“Now, my dear,” Lady Alston said, squeezing her fingers. “Don’t be so sad. Things will turn out for the best, you know. They always do.”

Odile smiled at her, wanting to ask her what she meant, but she had walked away. Odile heard her talking to a tall older man, who nodded and smiled and listened to her. Odile looked away, back across the ballroom.

The dance had finished and Odile spotted Harriet, walking towards her. She felt her lips lift in a grin, unable to feel anything but joy when she saw her sister’s soft cheeks pink with happiness.

“Sister? We were considering going out onto the terrace to take the air. Would that be all right? I mean, without someone to chaperone us?” She looked at Odile, wide-eyed.

Odile felt a frown crease her brow. She was genuinely not sure. When she saw Elmore watching her, a mix of confusion and happiness in his eyes, she agreed.

“Yes, Harriet, of course you may go. I’ll be at the refreshments table, should you need me.”

She saw them smile shyly at one another, and she watched them go, hand in hand, outside. She was sure that they were probably going to talk, and possibly to steal a kiss, but she wasn’t about to tell anyone, particularly since Harriet’s family approved the match. Or, she thought with a small smile, they would. As soon as she could tell their father.

She stood by the refreshments, feeling a strange mix of joy and sadness. She herself had never been courted, but she did not begrudge Harriet—she wanted her to have this. She had no idea what she was going to do, but her sister’s safety meant more to her than anything else.

And they would need to be safe. Her uncle, who would become the Baron should her father pass away, was a cruel, pitiless man. She knew from speaking with the housekeeper, who remembered them both from when they were young, that her uncle was liable not to give a penny to them for clothes or parties. Her father had emphasized that he was concerned for them and wanted them out of the house before his cousin took over.

“And so, I need to wed soon.”

She spoke aloud, the noise of dancing and talking too strong for anyone to overhear. She accepted some cordial and sipped at it, watching the dancing.

When Harriet came back in she was silent, but her blue eyes glowed with a brightness that only came from loving someone. Elmore stood beside her, his hand in hers, and Odile knew that they were both floating in the haze of their love. She felt her heart twist with joy.

The ball wore on, and Odile was feeling tired by the time the musicians were finally packing away their things and the footmen were helping people into cloaks and coats, ready to brave the cold

air of the nighttime streets.

“Odile,” Harriet whispered when they got into the coach, ready to leave. It was the first thing she had said to her since coming back in from outside.

“What is it?” Odile asked gently.

“Odile! He wants me to go with him to his home. He wants me to... to...” She was weeping, tears of joy pouring down her soft cheeks. Odile reached for her hand, knowing that her own eyes were damp, too.

“Sister! I’m so happy for you. I couldn’t be happier, truly. That is the most wonderful news. The most wonderful.” She could barely speak. It was what she had wanted, why she had come here to London in the first place, why she had insisted their father make a morning-long coach trip down to the townhouse

Harriet would soon be married, and safe with the Baron at his home.

Nobody could harm her.

Odile shut her eyes, leaning back on the cushioned wall of the coach, the road bumpy and making the coach lanterns jolt as they went along. She barely noticed. All she could think about—all that mattered to her—was that Harriet was safe.

As soon as they got home, she hung up her cloak and asked the butler for her father’s state of health.

Chapter 2

Odile looked at her father. He was sitting up in the chair that Mr. Highbury, the physician, had recommended for him—one that was wide but high-backed, so that he could be supported when he sat in it. He was facing the window, but Odile could not fail to notice the gray color of his cheeks. He looked exhausted.

“Father? Would you like something to drink?” she asked him softly.

“No. No...thank you, Odile,” he whispered. She looked into his face, which was tinged with blue at the temples, and felt her stomach tighten. She wished he hadn’t made the journey back to Staveley Manor—or, having done so, that he had not done it in one morning. He would have done much better to take it slowly, going a few hours in the coach at a time.

But now he was back.

She sat down by the chair and took his hand. It was icy. She pretended not to notice. His fingers had been this cold for months—maybe even for years. She had become used to it and never commented on it now. It was something to do with his circulation—the physician had said as much—though he didn’t know exactly what it was.

“Father, you will be well enough to attend the celebrations?” she asked softly.

He looked at her and in those pale eyes, she could see that he knew he would not be able to. But he would try, like he always did, to please them.

“I will try,” he said.

When had he ever done anything else?

Odile was crying. She didn’t want him to see, so she stood, going towards the window. She faced out, looking over the garden. The lawn was pale green, the sky raining down gently on the grasses

below. Odile wished she could hold back her emotion enough to thank her father, but she could not find any more strength in that moment.

She sat with him for a while longer, then excused herself and went upstairs. The reading room was warm and she drew out a chair, sitting down. She was exhausted. She had spent the last two weeks planning the preparations for Harriet and Elmore—the celebration would be here, at the Manor, and then they would depart, traveling down to his manor which was, thankfully, only a day away on the main road.

She was relieved that they were to live so close.

“Miss?” a maid called her softly. “Miss Harriet was looking for you. She’s downstairs.”

“Thank you, I’ll be down in a moment,” Odile said softly. She stood and leaned back against the bookshelf by the window, giving herself a moment longer to collect her thoughts and regain her equilibrium.

She didn’t want to let Harriet see how tired she had become.

“Sister?” Harriet said when she walked into the room where she waited. Her sister was dressed in a white gown with little green patterns. Her eyes widened as she saw Odile. “Am I to have the gown fitted today? And I was talking to Mr. Murray about the luncheon. Will Father be able to eat something, do you think?”

Odile frowned. She didn’t know what to say. She and her father had tried their best to hide the depth of his illness from Harriet. Whenever he saw her, he would be sure to be sitting up in his chair, and he tried to time the visits for after he had eaten, so that there was some semblance of health in him. She thought about her answer.

“Father will probably rest during most of the luncheon,” she said carefully. “But he will be at the church—he insists on it.”

“Oh, sister...” Harriet took her hands, looking into her eyes. “I am so happy. You have been so kind to me. You have organized the whole thing. I appreciate it so much!” She was crying, her cheeks wet. Odile drew her against herself and held her tight, her own eyes

soaked with tears.

She went upstairs again as soon as Harriet was safely in the drawing room and discussing her gowns with the seamstress. She was to have two new gowns made—one for the ball that would be after the ceremony, which she would wear to her new home, as well as her wedding gown. Odile sat on the little chintz-covered chair in her bedroom and looked out of the window over the lawns.

Out there, the rain had stopped, and little drops sparkled on the lawn. She found herself wondering about her own future. She would be left here in the house with her father. Could she manage to make a way for herself between that time and when her father passed away? She had no idea. She knew that, while he was alive, there was no way she would be able to attend parties or receive visitors since taking care of him took up her entire day.

“Miss Odile?” Mr. Murray said, coming in. “There’s a letter for you. From London.”

“I’ll read it later, Mr. Murray,” she said wearily. “If you could put it on my desk?”

“Yes, Miss,” he said. He placed it on the little desk in the corner of her room and departed softly. Odile looked at it, seeing with just a glance that it was from the solicitor in London. She was definitely not going to read it right now.

She went downstairs to the drawing room, deciding to read and to take a rest before anyone called her to take care of her father.

The next day dawned with sunshine pouring between the clouds. Odile hurried up to her sister’s room. Harriet was already dressing, her maid carefully helping her with the flower wreath for her head. She waited, watching proudly as Harriet stood before the looking glass and smiled broadly as Odile came in behind her.

“Sister...I don’t know what to say.”

Odile shook her head, her own eyes bright with tears. “You don’t need to say anything, sweetling,” she said softly. “You just need to be happy. You look so beautiful.”

She reached for her and they hugged, and Odile felt those firm arms

around her and her heart ached. She stepped back, giggling.

“I’m squashing your gown.”

“Oh, sister,” Harriet giggled. “You needn’t worry. I am sure it will recover quite well.”

Odile nodded and she studied her sister, noting again how beautiful she looked.

Her pale blonde curls were arranged high on her head, decorated with a white ribbon. Her gown had a low oval neck and a lacy skirt falling from a high waist and the sleeves ended at her elbows, showing her well-formed, pale arms and hands. She looked lovely and seemed to glow with a gentle softness.

“You look beautiful, too, sister,” Harriet said as she watched her. Odile grinned.

“I’m glad. Thank you, sister.” She looked down at her hands, resting on the pale green gown she wore. She had not wanted to spend money on something for herself, but Mrs. Huddersley had insisted, and she had made this gown for her. It was lovely, if made with old silk that had faded.

As Odile went down to wait with the others, she caught sight of her own reflection. Her brown hair was piled up on her head, showing off her long neck, and her wide eyes stared back at her, worried and afraid. She couldn’t help thinking about her own future and worrying about it.

She heard Mr. Murray in the hallway and hurried to where her father was standing—yes, *standing*—by the door. She hadn’t seen him on his feet in months and she ran to his side and took his hand, helping to hold him upright.

“This is my daughter’s wedding day,” he said as Mr. Murray helped him into the coach. “The least I can do is walk to the coach.”

Odile felt her heart ache.

She and Harriet climbed in after him. Harriet held his hand mutely the whole way, eyes full of care and warmth at seeing him.

Odile waited while the coachman helped Father out on the other

side. He insisted on walking to the church. She could hear his breathing, rasping and tight, and she knew that he was going too far. She walked behind him, watching him with Harriet. She felt so proud of them. She loved them so dearly.

She followed them into the church and slipped into a pew, then she watched as Elmore took her sister's hand so tenderly, and then turned back to the front of the church.

The ceremony was short, but beautiful, and Odile couldn't help crying as she sat and watched, and later crying as she stood and watched the two of them walking down the aisle together.

"It's a beautiful wedding," Mr. Murray whispered to her as they went out of the door of the church to see Elmore depart with Harriet in the big coach back to their estate. She smiled at him fondly. The whole staff was there—besides a few relatives and friends, they made up half of the guests.

"It is," she said.

Her father slept in the coach on the way back to the house. He insisted on attending the dinner. She knew how pleased Harriet was to have him there, and how worried she was, too. She was grateful that he had attended, but she also worried—as Harriet did—about the toll it was taking on his strength.

"Go to bed, Father," she said gently as the last course was served.

"Yes, daughter. I think I shall."

Odile felt relieved. He had been sitting there for too long and she knew he must be exhausted. She could see the tension in his neck and shoulders and his hands were freezing.

"Goodnight, Father," Harriet said. He had managed to stand, and Odile was grateful when his manservant rushed forward to help him up as Harriet stood to kiss him goodnight.

They embraced.

Odile leaned back in her chair, watching her father go up the stairs with worried eyes.

The rest of the guests departed slowly, and Odile tried to forget her

worry as she went out to the steps to send them off.

“Oh, sister!” Harriet said, as they stood on the steps together, waiting for the coach to be readied. “You will visit often, won’t you?”

“As often as I may, Harriet. You can be sure I will.”

“Good,” Harriet said, and reached down and embraced her. Odile squeezed her firmly to her chest and then waved as the coach drew out of the grounds, carrying Harriet and Elmore away to their new life and leaving her in charge of Staveley Manor.

Want to know how the story ends? Tap on the link below to read the rest of the story

<https://amzn.to/3q4lTjt>

Thank you very much.

Also by Hanna Hamilton

Thank you for reading *Code Name Duchess!*

I hope you enjoyed it! If you did, may I ask you to [please write a review HERE?](#) It would mean the world to me. Reviews are very important and allow me to keep writing the books that you love to read!

Some other best sellers of mine:

The Silvered Duchess of Oldingham Manor

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Also, if you liked this book, you can also check out my full [Amazon Book Catalogue HERE](#).

Thank you for allowing me to keep doing what I love!

Hanna Hamilton

About the Author

Hanna Hamilton has been fascinated with the regency era ever since she was a young teen, first discovering historical romance novels by famous authors such as Jane Austen and Lisa Kleypas. She believes that love was just so much more magical back then, more like a fairy tale. She always daydreamed about finding love herself that way, but since that is impossible in the twenty first century, she decided to write about it instead!

Born in Texas, Hanna Hamilton obtained a degree in Creative Writing, and had worked as a literature teacher before becoming a novelist. When she isn't writing, Hanna likes to explore the countryside with her husband and two children, gaining inspiration from the natural world around her.

So, come on a journey into love, confusion, and redemption all within the regency era. Hanna hopes that you will enjoy immersing yourself into her novels, and that you too will find a love for old fashioned romance, just as she has.

Hanna is part of **Cobalt Fairy's** team of authors! Visit cobaltfairy.com for new, bargain and free deals for every dedicated bookworm there is out there!

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